

THE TIME TRAVELERS CLUB

ALLISON

JULIA STIRLING

ALLISON

The Time Travelers Club 2

Inhalt

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

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Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

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Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

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Twenty-one

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Twenty-seven

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Thirty

Thirty-one

Thirty-two

Thirty-three

Epilogue

Julia's Romance Club

A review would be wonderful!

Chapter One of Book 3 in the Series: Lauren

More time travel romance by Julia Stirling

"Damn it, Allison, if you don't answer that phone now or switch it off, I'm going to throw the stupid thing off the highest tower in the castle," Caitrin threatened, slamming her pen down on the table.

Allison gritted her teeth while checking her phone. "It's not as easy as you think," she hissed at her friend.

"And what exactly is so difficult?" Caitrin asked. "I thought you didn't have any work assignments right now. If it's an assignment, then just take it and go. If you have to leave, so be it, then you'll start time traveling later. And if it's not an assignment, it can't be that important. Or is it something private we just don't know about?"

Caitrin was visibly annoyed, and Allison didn't blame her. She turned the phone face down so she couldn't see when the screen lit up with a notification. "So, let's move on. Where were we?"

She tried to look interested, but her thoughts were on the caller. She had recognized the number and a shiver ran down her spine when she thought about what it could be about.

"We were just going over the courtesies to a clan leader," Caitrin explained. "I have no idea what era you'll end up in, so it's even more important that you know all of them. So, let's turn this whole thing around." She blew a strand of hair out of her face. "What did I just explain to you?"

Allison considered pretending she still remembered, but she knew her friend was far too intelligent and would see through that little charade quite quickly. She sighed. "Alright, I wasn't listening."

"Yeah, because this is the twelfth time your cell phone has rung this morning."

"You were counting?"

Caitrin stood up and walked to the window. "Allison, it won't work this way. If you're actually going to travel, you need to be prepared. I can't just let you stumble into this. You would be in too much danger. And I don't want that. But if you don't take the time to learn these things, I can't really help you either. And then I can't let you go. Besides, I might not have much time left here," she said. "Jenna and Evan will be back soon. If they have good news, I may leave soon. But I can't leave you here with this half-knowledge. Then you won't be

able to leave until sometime in the future. Or maybe you'll just need to learn it by yourself."

Allison crossed her arms. "Will I have to take an exam?"

She had wanted to make a joke, but Caitrin looked at her seriously.

"You're kidding," Allison said. "I'm not a little kid anymore. I've done so many research trips in my life. I'm sure I can handle things just fine. You can't force me to take an exam."

"You certainly don't act like an adult sometimes, though. You act like a little kid," Caitrin said flippantly.

They'd been alone together for weeks, and Allison knew it was mostly cabin fever getting to them. Caitrin also wasn't used to living with other people. And, she was anxiously awaiting Jenna and Evan's return. They had been looking for a gate in the United States for her.

Allison, on the other hand, was not used to staying in one location for such a long time and was feeling like she was accomplishing nothing. Normally, her life was much more exciting. And, she was beginning to feel like she couldn't wrap her head around any more information about the ancient Gaelic language, 16th-century dresses, or the history of Scotland. She thought that she was quite prepared, after all, and you could never cover everything. There was always a little wiggle room. As a journalist, she was experienced enough that she could fill in the gaps. However, she also knew that Caitrin completely disagreed.

"Let's take a break," Allison suggested.

Caitrin nodded. "I'm going out to the garden," she said and disappeared through the patio door.

As soon as she left the room, Allison checked her cell phone. Two more missed calls. It was becoming more urgent, and she felt sick. She had never experienced anything like this in her life. In fact, things had reached the point where she never wanted to answer the phone anymore at all, also, for the first time in her life. Normally, every call could mean the possibility of discovering a new world or meeting new people.

She had already turned off her voicemail, but text messages were still reaching her. Same with email. Recently, she had researched one of the numbers on the internet because she had a very bad feeling, and sure enough, it was the number from the police headquarters in London. Not good at all. Allison often dealt with the police in her professional life, but that was in her role as a journalist for information. This time was different. The police not only wanted information from her, but the police wanted *her*.

Allison was relatively sure that no one knew where she was. And they wouldn't find her so quickly here in remote Scotland because Caitrin was very good at keeping her address a secret. But Allison

suspected that it was only a matter of time before the police found her. And then what? Would they throw her in jail? And even worse, what if it wasn't the police who found her first, but him? What if he was faster? She knew he had hired at least one private detective to try to find out where she was. And if that was the case, she hoped the police found her first.

This time, she had also noticed her editor, Carla's number. She had called five times within the last hour. It could only mean that Carla was really worried about her. They were close and had always worked well together. Or maybe it was that the editor was trying to reach her because the police had told her to. Carla wasn't as bold as Allison, which was why she was the editor and Allison was the reporter. It was quite possible that she had caved in to police pressure.

Allison considered whether she should call Carla back. But then she realized that her call could be traced.

Or maybe she had simply read too many spy books. She didn't even know easy it would be, but she didn't want to take any chances.

Although her cell phone had rung so many times over the past weeks, she had felt quite safe here in the Scottish Highlands. In Caitrin's house, with its beautiful garden and in the company of her friends, it had seemed like a wonderful and long vacation. Although she had never actually taken a vacation, but she thought it must have felt that way. The best part, however, was that an unexpected escape had opened up for her here. And the only person still standing in her way was Caitrin.

Allison rose with a sigh and went into her room, where she had set up a small office. She glanced over at her laptop. Over the past few weeks, she had spent an inordinate amount of time studying encryption and IP addresses, trying to figure out how to cover her tracks on the net. At least a little bit. But she also knew that if the police really wanted to find her, the IT people could accomplish that in a matter of minutes.

Her eyes fell to the bag that stood packed in a corner. Allison had chosen a small bag, one that wouldn't stand out even if one of her friends came into her room. None of them would question her about that small piece of luggage sitting there. However, if her friends knew what was packed inside it, they would be very worried, regardless of what they thought was going on in Allison's life right now.

In the bag was everything she needed for a quick escape. Most of the items had been easy to find because Caitrin was always prepared for any contingency and never knew what a woman from the past arriving through the gate might need. Allison was aware that she was literally stealing from Caitrin, but she also knew that her friend would understand, especially if she needed these things for her escape. At

least, she would after she had learned the whole story.

On the one hand, Allison desperately hoped she would never need the escape bag, but on the other hand, it also felt like an exciting adventure. Even though deep in her heart, she still didn't really believe that she could actually travel through time. When she thought about it seriously, it just seemed absurd.

Through the window, she saw Caitrin working in the garden. Allison felt a deep love for her friend and, above all, gratitude. Actually, Caitrin really did not want to be here anymore. She wanted to go in search of the man she loved. But, she had stayed to give Allison lessons to prepare her for her journey into the past. She really took her job as gatekeeper seriously, and Allison suspected that she was even more strict with her than with the other women.

Still, Allison was getting tired of the lessons. She was glad that Jenna and her boyfriend, Evan, would come home this afternoon. She hoped they would bring good news for Caitrin so she could leave immediately for America in order to look for her Finlay. Then Allison would be free to travel if she wanted to. There was nothing really to keep her here. Especially as the net was tightening around her, and everything that was waiting for her in the past couldn't be worse than ending up in prison, or even worse, having to face him. She knew for certain that he would take revenge on her. After all, she had robbed him of his fortune.

Allison and Caitrin had just sat down in the garden for their afternoon lesson when they heard a car pull up. Allison's heart beat faster, as it always did these days whenever someone rang the doorbell—which rarely happened—or whenever new messages or emails came through her phone. In fact, having a car pull up into the driveway had actually never happened yet, until now. Even though they were expecting Jenna and Evan, she suddenly felt nauseous. The car stopped in front of the house, and she couldn't make out the passengers.

Caitrin looked at her watch and said, "It's way too early. Can they really be here already?"

She stood up, and Allison rose slowly as well. Her heart was racing. "You go check," she said, "I'll be right there."

Fortunately, Caitrin was so excited about Jenna's return, she didn't give much thought as to why Allison didn't want to meet them with her. She hurried across the lawn and disappeared into the house.

As soon as Caitrin was out of sight, Allison also went into the house, but not to the front door, directly to her room. She grabbed the bag and slipped into Jenna's room. She could see the driveway from there. She peeked cautiously through the curtains and tried to catch a glimpse of the passengers. But all she could make out was the gray car, and then all of a sudden, a tall man. Her heart leaped into her throat, but as soon as she heard the bright female voices as well as laughter, she relaxed. She finally recognized Evan, who was unloading the suitcases. It was not a police officer. She also saw Jenna hugging Caitrin.

Allison returned to her room and gently placed the bag back into the corner. She realized she wasn't actually ready to leave yet. Especially not without saying goodbye to her friends.

Suddenly it was clear that she really should tell them about it. But then it occurred to her that she would be putting the others in grave danger.

Considering what she should do, she went to the door and arrived

just in time as the other three entered. She smiled and hugged them both. She was so happy to see them again. Besides, they would bring some variety to the monotony of the days spent in Caitrin's time travel class.

Allison tried to read Jenna's face to see how things had gone and what news she was bringing. But as always, it was hard to read her friend's face. And Evan's even more so. He was too used to hiding his thoughts all his life. That's why Allison didn't even try with him but watched Jenna closely.

Caitrin's cheeks were rosy too, and her eyes darted anxiously back and forth between Jenna and Evan. Finally, she wrung her hands and blurted out, "I know you just got here, but I just can't take it anymore. Did you guys find it?"

Allison was also holding her breath for a completely different reason. She hoped that they had found a gate in America. She wanted Caitrin to be able to travel, of course, but she also really wanted to be released from time travel school.

Jenna and Evan exchanged a look. This doesn't bode well, Allison thought. Her friend took Caitrin's hands. "We don't know for sure," she said softly.

"What do you mean you don't know for sure?" asked Caitrin. "This is torture, Jenna. Please tell me."

She sighed. "There's good news and bad news, and it's even a little more complicated than that."

"That's why it might be good if they come in first. We give them something to drink and eat, and then they can tell us the story," Allison noted.

Caitrin blushed. "You're right," she said, "come on in."

Jenna smiled and walked hand-in-hand with Evan to the kitchen.

A short time later, everyone was gathered around the table. Caitrin anxiously leaned forward. "So, what's the bad news?"

Jenna reached for Evan's hand, and he gave her an encouraging nod. "The place where Evan used to travel with his family no longer exists. There's a housing development there now, and we really made ourselves unpopular. We almost even got shot looking for the rock formation. We did find two of the twelve rocks, but they had been moved with a backhoe. There's a golf course where the rest of the rocks used to be. The other rocks have either been buried and built over or were hauled away. It's impossible to recreate the formation."

Caitrin swallowed hard, but Allison leaned forward. "You almost got shot? How did you manage that?" That sounded like an exciting story.

"It's not particularly advisable," Jenna said, "to hang around anyone's yard in the United States. At least that's what I learned. Evan

warned me, but I didn't listen. After all, how could anyone know that it's okay to shoot people who walk around your backyard there."

Allison raised an eyebrow. Turning to Evan, she said, "Then it's a wonder you didn't shoot Jenna when she was wandering around your castle."

"Hey," he protested, "just because I'm an American doesn't mean I would do something like that. I'd always take a good look at who's roaming around my property."

He winked at Jenna, and it was obvious they were both thinking about how they had met. Allison almost felt a little jealous because the love between them was so obvious.

"And I'm very glad," Evan continued, "that I didn't shoot right away because otherwise, I would have missed all of this."

Jenna leaned over and gave him a kiss.

Caitrin shifted restlessly back and forth in her chair. "All right, so you didn't find the rocks," she said, "that was the bad news, right?"

Jenna nodded. "We actually spent most of our time looking for that particular gate because it would have been the easiest solution. But just before we came home, we met someone who was able to help us."

She raised an eyebrow and looked at Evan. He cleared his throat and grinned a little.

"Who did you meet?" interjected Allison, who wanted to speed up the story a bit and just didn't understand the secret looks between Evan and Jenna, which annoyed her more than she wanted to admit.

"We met a pretty special woman," Jenna said with a smile, "who believes that an Indian woman she had met might know where to find the amulet symbol."

"You told her about the stone?" asked Caitrin breathlessly.

Jenna shook her head, and again her eyes drifted to Evan. "We didn't need to because she knew Evan's tattoo pretty well." Apparently, she noticed Allison's frown because Jenna added, "She's an old flame of his. And because of that, she's seen the tattoo many times. And she was so fascinated by the design that she drew it herself. And then, while she was attending a retreat, she saw it again."

"Had you told her the truth while you were seeing each other?" asked Caitrin.

Allison realized that she was indeed a perfect gatekeeper. As always, she protected the secret of the gate.

Evan shook his head. "She was pretty flighty even then and loved the tattoo, but I knew it wasn't anything long-term, so I didn't tell her about it. Plus, it wasn't just my story. It was my sister's and my mom's. But since we last saw each other, which was about ten years ago," he said in Jenna's direction, "she's become even more involved in mysticism, and I think she's been going to quite a few spiritual retreats

and seminars. She told us that at a retreat on a reservation, she saw a stone with the same design as my tattoo carved into it." He spread his hands. "It almost sounded like she was describing your stone or ours, which we can't find anymore."

"And did you go there?" asked Caitrin breathlessly. "Did you find it?"

Jenna and Evan shook their heads. "We didn't have any more time. Besides, it was a lot farther away than we thought."

"Where was it?" asked Allison, leaning forward.

Evan screwed up his face. "She couldn't remember exactly," he explained. "That's the problem when you're doing that much weed and other mind-altering drugs. She could describe the area somewhat but wasn't sure if it was somewhere in Virginia or West Virginia. She didn't even remember how she got to the seminar because someone gave her a ride, or maybe she hitchhiked."

"Couldn't you try to get more out of her?" asked Allison.

Jenna sighed. "She really didn't know anything else. And since we couldn't search all of Virginia and West Virginia, we figured we'd come back here and do some research on seminars first. But the good thing is, we have Mackenzie's," she rolled her eyes at the name, and Evan had to grin, "email address and can send her pictures of the seminar locations or the people we find. If we can find anything, that is." Jenna turned to Allison. "We were also hoping you might be able to help with that. I mean, you're so good at research, and I'm sure you have a whole other set of resources you can tap into."

"Oh yes, please," Caitrin said, reaching for Allison's hand.

She felt the familiar tingle of excitement when she was on the trail of a new story. She loved to research and wanted nothing more than to sit down at her computer and get started. "Of course I will," she exclaimed.

Jenna exhaled in relief, then exchanged a glance with Evan. "There's something else, though." She reached for Caitrin's hands. "Please don't get mad; it's not our fault."

Oh, this is going to be exciting, Allison thought, while Caitrin frowned.

Jenna took a deep breath. "When we were there, Mackenzie posted the amulet design on her social media and asked if anyone had seen it before."

"She did what?" whispered Caitrin. She had turned white as a sheet.

Evan crossed his arms. "She did it without discussing it with us first. We would never have let her do that."

"This is a disaster," Caitrin said softly.

But Allison felt excitement gripping her. "Did anything come of it?"

Again, that look between Evan and Jenna. "She has quite a few followers from all over the world, and they all share the same spiritual mysticism beliefs. Actually, while we were still there, three people posted a photo with the amulet design."

Caitrin opened her mouth and closed it again.

"And what were they like?" Allison asked.

"One was a tattoo, but different from Evan's. The second photo showed the design in a stone, but it looked more East Asian. And the final one was graffiti, probably from a subway."

"Do you guys have more info? Who posted them?"

Jenna sighed. "We're still working with Mackenzie on that. Although, we haven't reached out to her in the meantime. She doesn't seem very reliable."

Evan nodded. "She isn't. But she always means well."

Jenna squeezed Caitrin's hands. "Is everything okay?"

Caitrin nodded slowly. "Why is she so interested in the amulet symbol?"

Jenna looked back at Evan, who gave her an encouraging nod. "We believe she's also one of us and just doesn't know it yet. She's magically drawn to the design but can't explain why. She even dreams about it often."

Caitrin nodded. "Then it's a good thing you, of all people, met her."

"And you're not mad she posted it?"

Caitrin hesitated, then shook her head. "Maybe something good will come of it. And she actually saw the amulet symbol with some Indians?"

Allison noticed Evan's face contort at the word Indian. It wasn't politically correct, but now was not the time to point that out to Caitrin.

Jenna nodded. "Yes. And we really need to find out where that was. But we can't get anywhere on our own. We've already looked around a bit on the internet, but you can't imagine how many seminars like this there are in the United States" She looked at Evan. "You people are really strange."

He raised his hands defensively. "Hey, I've never been to a seminar like that. And if I have my way, I never will. But Caitrin might have to attend one soon if the stone really exists there."

Allison leaned back. "Well, let's hope it really is there. And Finlay too, and that he didn't decide to travel out West..." she said slowly.

Evan rubbed his face. "I'd bet Finlay is on the East Coast, that is if he's in America at all. Most of the Scots ended up on the East Coast and stayed there. But," he added, nodding encouragingly at Caitrin, "first, we have to actually find the gate."

"And hope the gate will work for me there," Caitrin murmured.

"Maybe it really is the case that only the gate closest to you works. We just know far too little about how they work." She looked at Evan. "After all, until recently, I didn't even know there were other gates in the world."

Jenna looked lovingly at her friend. "The good thing is, we still have our stone here. You can always go through this gate and try to get to America from here."

"I'm not really sure," Caitrin said, "whether I want to sail across the Atlantic in one of those rickety boats. Just the thought of it makes me nauseous."

They all knew that Caitrin suffered from severe seasickness, even on the big ships of modern time. Caitrin had always managed to avoid any class trip that included a ship voyage.

"But you would do it for Finlay, right?" asked Jenna.

Immediately, the fear left Caitrin's eyes and gave way to a tenderness that stung Allison a little bit again. Her friend nodded. "I'd do anything for him."

Allison shifted restlessly in her chair. There were way too many emotions involved. If only Lauren was here. She was as unlucky in love as Allison, and it would make it a little easier to bear. She clapped her hands and stood up. "Good, then that's settled. We'll find out where this stone is, and if it doesn't work out, Caitrin will just travel from here. And now I'd like to get on with my time travel lesson."

Astonished, Caitrin gaped at her. "You're kidding, right?"

Allison shook her head. "Not at all. Come on, let's go."

"All right." Caitrin rose. "Afterwards, though, I want to know more about your journey."

Jenna nodded. "How are the classes going?"

Allison straightened her shoulders. "I may not have been the model student so far, but that will change right now because knowing my research skills, I will find this stone in no time, and then my teacher will no longer be available. Therefore, the two of us will study now. And you two," she said, turning to Jenna and Evan, "have a lie down, you look terrible. Have you slept at all during this trip?"

Jenna and Evan exchanged a look, and to Allison's surprise, her friend blushed a little. She waved it off. "I didn't really want to know that much." She looked at Caitrin. "Should we hike up to the castle and go over how the rooms were arranged back then?"

Allison couldn't concentrate on the lesson, even though she enjoyed learning about the castle. Caitrin wasn't really concentrating either. She kept stopping, staring into space, and forgetting what she was doing.

"Should we quit?" asked Allison, and Caitrin nodded.

"I just can't believe that the gate existed and it's been destroyed. What a waste."

Allison nodded. "If you like, I can start researching now."

Caitrin's face brightened. "That would be wonderful," she said, "What do you need from me?"

"First, silence," Allison said, "and most importantly, a picture of your amulet. Or even the amulet itself."

Caitrin grabbed her neck and looked a little startled.

"You can trust me," Allison reassured her, "I won't use it to leave."

Her friend smiled. "I know, still, it feels strange for me to take it off and give it to you. Won't a photo be good enough?"

Allison nodded. "I just need to be able to see the pattern and be able to match it."

She stepped forward and photographed the amulet around Caitrin's neck. Once again, she noticed the beautiful pattern and how finely crafted the necklace was.

"Do women lose the amulet often or have it stolen from them?"

"They always take very good care of it. After all, it's kind of like a plane ticket or an admission ticket. And once it's gone and you happen to be in the wrong time where there's no gatekeeper, you won't be able to travel back. That's why everyone guards their amulet very closely. But on occasion, they have been stolen. But luckily, those women were able to find a new amulet."

Allison grinned wryly. "You may have just never heard from those who weren't so lucky and couldn't return home."

She had said it lightly, but Caitrin froze, and Allison realized she had said the wrong thing. "You've never thought about that before," she noted.

Caitrin shook her head wordlessly.

Allison sighed. "I'm sure they're all intelligent women and can find a way to return. And most importantly, they'll be very careful."

Her friend rose. "I think I'll go back through the log and see who's come back lately and who I haven't heard from in a while. Just to be safe," she said with a faint smile.

"You do that," Allison replied. "And I'll be on my way to the internet. But I need one more thing from you," she said.

Caitrin raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"What was Finlay's full name?"

Her friend took a deep breath. "Finlay Alexander William Maclean," she said, and Allison could hear the longing in her voice.

Allison repeated the name aloud, trying to memorize it.

"Why do you want to know?"

She put an arm around her friend, and together, they walked to the house. "I don't think it would be wrong to check where in the United States he lived. Otherwise, you might end up searching in the wrong spot."

"I've said before that usually there's almost nothing in the records about most people," Caitrin explained.

Allison shook her head. "It was different for the people who emigrated. I think there are research possibilities since so many of them have been recorded on official lists with documentation. I'll look around to be sure. As you know, Americans are much more interested in genealogy than we are. They've recorded almost everyone."

"I don't know whether I want you to find him or not," Caitrin confessed.

"You can always decide that after I find him," Allison replied.

She sat at the computer and deliberately did not open her email box. She wanted to find the other information now. She loaded the picture she had taken with her cell phone onto the computer. Then she started looking for Celtic patterns but soon gave up because there were just too many. She would have to gather a little more information first and then refine her search.

Instead, she turned to the immigrant lists and anything she could find around the year 1786 because that was the year Caitrin had last seen Finlay. She typed in the name Caitrin had given her but couldn't find that combination. Under Finlay Campbell, on the other hand, there were a great many entries – several dozen.

Allison sighed. Generic names were always bad for research. But her years as a reporter helped her not to be intimidated by that. She spent several hours combing through lists and eventually compiled the names of twenty-one men. It still wasn't satisfactory because she couldn't assess at all whether any of them were the man Caitrin loved.

They had all lived in America at the time that Caitrin's Finlay was supposed to be living there. But she wasn't even sure if he had landed in America at all. Well, she would do her best to find him. At least all but one had actually lived on the East Coast, most of them in South Carolina, Virginia, and Connecticut.

Allison was about to continue looking when a message flashed up. She hadn't opened her email inbox but had forgotten to turn off the notification she had set up for herself on certain topics.

As she stared at the notification and read the first line, her blood ran cold. It was about him.

Almost reflexively, she clicked on the small box in the upper corner of her screen. It took her to the page where an article had just been posted. It was an article from the *Guardian*. The headline made Allison nauseous.

House keeper of accused real estate mogul Walden found dead.

Below was a picture of a young woman Allison knew all too well. They had met often when Allison wanted to leave the apartment, and the woman had come to clean everything during the day while he was not home.

Allison didn't want to read the article but couldn't contain her curiosity. She knew she was going to feel sick. Sure enough, Sabrina Adams had died under mysterious circumstances. She had been found dead in her apartment, and it appeared to be an accident. But the police hadn't ruled out murder, as the evidence suggested that she could have saved herself if it had really been an accident. Sabrina had not been at an age to die from these kinds of injuries. Moreover, she had been the housekeeper for a man who had recently been charged with a crime. Allison read with horror that Sabrina would have been a witness in the case. Just like her.

She closed her laptop and rose. She opened the window to the garden and took a deep breath. The sun was slowly setting over the Scottish hills, and everything seemed so incredibly peaceful. Mentally, Allison was still in the juggernaut she had left behind in London. It was a place that she now not only associated with a white-collar criminal but to which a murder had been added. She was very sure that he had murdered Sabrina, or rather, had commissioned it, especially if she was to be a witness at his trial.

Cleaning ladies usually knew a whole lot, just like secretaries. Most of the time, these women were her first points of contact when she was doing research for a story. But the worst part of all was that Allison was responsible for putting Sabrina Adams in this situation.

She closed her eyes and shook her head. Allison felt she was partly to blame that this woman was now dead. She, on the other hand, was in Scotland, enjoying the evening sun, the view of a beautiful wild

garden, and enjoying the company of her friends. She heard someone in the kitchen and knew they were getting ready to sit down to dinner together. Sabrina Adams would never experience anything like that again.

Her throat tightened. Once again, she considered going back to London, but the thought that he might find her and possibly murder her like Sabrina, made her feel dizzy. She knew she was brave. She had proven that many times, but she also knew that courage could do nothing against this unscrupulous man. She regretted the day she had gotten involved with him, even though she couldn't have known what he was all about at the time.

She had nothing to gain. She had told the police everything but had not volunteered to testify in the trial because she knew it would be dangerous. Even though he was in custody, his henchmen were everywhere. And some of them were even more unscrupulous than he was. No, if she were to go back to London or emerge from hiding, she would be putting her life in danger, and that would help no one.

Allison tried to relax but couldn't calm down. She used a breathing technique she had learned from a soldier. Inhale on the count of four, hold your breath on the count of four, exhale on the count of four, hold your breath on the count of four, and on and on. Finally, her heart stopped racing, and her mind settled down.

As she continued her breathing exercises, she noticed Evan walking through the garden. He was apparently on his way to the castle, alone. He hadn't been there for a few weeks and probably just wanted to make sure everything was all right. After all, he was leasing the castle.

Suddenly, Allison saw an opportunity. She slipped her sneakers on and quietly followed him out of the house. Jenna wasn't with him, and a quick glance in her room confirmed she was sound asleep. Where Caitrin was, she wasn't sure.

Evan was a good distance ahead of her and no longer in the garden. The evening sun was still shining as she climbed up the path to the castle and found him in the castle courtyard.

"Hello," Allison said, stepping over to him. "Are you checking to see if everything's okay?"

Surprised, he turned around, "What are you doing here?"

Allison decided to cut to the chase. "I need to talk to you," she explained.

He eyed her seriously, then said, "Since you didn't bring it up earlier and apparently can't wait until dinner, I'm assuming it's something you don't want Caitrin and Jenna to overhear."

Allison grimaced. "That's right," she said, "the reason I picked you is because you can keep a secret."

He frowned but remained silent.

"So, can you keep a secret?"

Evan crossed his arms and was silent for another moment, then he replied, "It depends. Actually, I'm pretty good at it, but if it's anything involving Jenna, I can't promise. We swore to each other that we would always be honest with each other and not keep things from each other. I'd like to stick to that. If it's a secret that puts me in a position where I have to lie to her, it's going to be difficult."

Now it was Allison's turn to think for a moment. Finally, she shook her head and said, "I do think Jenna would be outraged at first that I told you and not her, but if we explain why, she'll probably understand. After all, I just don't want to put her in danger. You want that too, right?"

Evan regarded her with raised eyebrows. "Now I'm starting to get curious."

Allison made a decision. "Once you've heard the story, and if you think it might come between you and Jenna, you may tell her about it."

Evan nodded. "Deal. So, how can I help?"

"You just need to listen. I feel like I need to tell someone this story, just so that someone knows in case something happens. Can we sit down there?" She pointed to a ledge on the wall.

Evan nodded.

Allison took a deep breath, wondering where to begin. "You know I'm a journalist."

Again, Evan nodded.

"And I'm always looking for stories. I'm just not capable of looking past them. I'm just too curious for that." She sighed. "And sometimes, I feel like the stories find me. It was like that two years ago. I met a man I found quite intriguing. I started an affair with him. It was exciting and thrilling since he was very different from any man I had ever known. However, it took me a while to figure out that he was a narcissist. Not only that, but he was a cheater. I discovered that by accident because he carelessly left papers lying around in plain sight."

Evan raised an eyebrow, and Allison jutted her chin out a little.

"Well," she admitted, "I did look around his apartment a bit. But only because I had overheard some snippets of conversations, things that seemed strange to me, and I felt it was my duty to check to see if he was doing anything illegal. I found out that there was a lot of unsavory things going on. And it wasn't just real estate scams. It was a lot worse."

When Allison didn't continue, Evan asked, "And those would be?"

He said it matter-of-factly, like a police officer taking a witness statement who had done it thousands of times. His staidness gave Allison the confidence to keep talking.

"It was along the lines of prostitution and human trafficking," she said. "I gathered the records and stayed together with him until I got the complete picture. Then I went to the police."

"Did they believe you?"

Allison nodded. "It was all well documented because if there's one thing I know how to do, it's gather information."

"I'm sure it was difficult for you to go to the police instead of writing a story about it."

Surprised, she looked at him. "How did you know that?"

"Because that's how I would have felt," he explained.

Allison had to smile. She had indeed picked the right person to confide in. "Fortunately, the police acted right away," she continued. "He was arrested and charged pretty quickly. They're still sifting through everything and gathering witnesses for the trial, though."

Evan was silent, and when Allison didn't speak further, he said almost casually, "So you're the one who got this Walden story going, not the housekeeper."

Allison's head jerked up, and she felt suddenly nauseous.

Evan smiled at her reassuringly. "I read the paper, too," he said. "I had no idea you were involved."

"And that's what worries me," Allison explained. "The police haven't released my name, of course, nor has he shown up anywhere else. But he knows it was me, of course, and that scares me."

"Do you think the housekeeper was murdered?"

Allison nodded before she could even think about an answer. "Yes, he's capable of that. There are enough people he pays who would do that for him."

"That means you're afraid he's coming after you, too."

Allison bit her lip and nodded. "I don't just believe it. I know it. He would never let that go."

"Is that why you came here?"

She sighed. "It was a pretty happy coincidence," she explained. "I was considering my options of what to do and where to disappear to when Caitrin got in touch and asked if we could come visit her here. I don't know if Jenna told you, but we didn't even know Caitrin's address. Her mailing address is a different address. And the exact reason she does that is because she doesn't want to be found. Only the people in the village know that she lives here. And they're not exactly forthcoming. When I realized that, I knew this would be the perfect place to hide. That's why I stayed."

"But you've been here for several weeks," Evan remarked. "Do you think he's given up looking?"

Allison shook her head. "He never gives up."

"What are you going to do now?"

She was thinking about what to say when Evan suddenly laughed softly. "That's why," he said.

"What's why?"

"That's why there's a packed bag in your room, and that's why you want to learn everything quickly so you can travel if things get dicey."

Allison sat up and straightened her shoulders. "It's the perfect escape route," she said. "He can never follow me there. The only thing is..." she added slowly, then broke off.

"That you're worried about what happens to Caitrin, Jenna, and Lauren if he finds you here. Or at least if he finds out you were here," Evan completed the sentence.

Allison nodded unhappily. "Also, because the police might find me here, too. If I'm not around and you can't explain where I am, it could get pretty difficult. Jenna is brave, and Caitrin too, of course, but I don't want to get them in trouble for anything this guy has done." She put on a charming smile. "And that's why I thought I'd better talk to you. I know I can trust you and that you might even have ideas how to help. Besides, it was important to me that someone knows the true story and understands what a mess I've gotten myself into."

Evan nodded seriously. "Now that I know that, I'll definitely be more vigilant. Nothing will happen to Jenna and Caitrin, and of course, to Lauren when she returns. And how to explain where you went is something I'll need to think about." He was silent for a moment. "Can I ask you one more thing?"

"You want to know why I'm not making myself available as a witness?"

Evan nodded. "At least when the trial is over, you would be able to live quietly again. And who knows, they could release him if they don't have enough witnesses."

A shiver went down Allison's spine. "But I don't want to end up dead either."

"And what if you let the police protect you?"

Allison thought back to her conversation with the detectives. They had given her little hope that she could go into a witness protection program. And even if she did, she wouldn't want to since it meant she'd never be allowed to see Caitrin, Jenna, and Lauren again.

"I did my duty and gave them all the documents. That should be enough to convict him. I don't want to be killed or have to go into a witness protection program."

Evan said nothing, but she could see him mulling it over and was no longer poker-faced.

They sat on the wall in silence for a long time. Allison was relieved she had chosen the right person to confide in. Evan hadn't been shocked or concerned at all. It was as if she had told him what the

menu was for lunch today. She was grateful he was on her side and that he was experienced in handling even worse situations as an ER doctor and in war zones.

"Thank you," she finally said simply.

Evan smiled at her. "I haven't done anything yet," he replied.

Allison laughed. "Only you would think that. Jenna is really lucky she found you. And we're also lucky because of that."

Evan stood up. "Let's go back down. I'm hungry and can't think on an empty stomach."

When she heard the engine sound outside the house, Allison stiffened. She was sitting at the living room table, working through the lists she had printed from the internet. Jenna was lounging on the sofa reading a book, Evan was also in the house, and Caitrin was working in the kitchen. They weren't expecting anyone when the car pulled in. Allison was listening carefully to what was happening outside but tried not to let on.

Caitrin had heard the car, too. She looked out the kitchen window and muttered, "Who could that be?"

Right then, Allison knew her time was up. She wasn't even close to finishing her research and hadn't found a thing that would help Caitrin. She was most sorry about that but knew her friend would know how to help.

Her heart was racing when she rose, gathered the papers, and slipped them into the folder. She felt weak as she went into the kitchen and stepped behind Caitrin to make sure not to get too close to the window. She looked out and saw a dark blue car parked in the driveway and two men. They were talking to each other while one was buttoning his jacket and the other was looking around.

When one of the men turned around, Allison almost dropped her glass. Somehow, she had always expected that it would be the police who would show up first. But now, it was one of Daniel Walden's henchmen who had come. Tom Webber. So, he did send his men to track her down.

She had always assumed that Daniel's men would break in during the night or approach the house unnoticed. That's why she had barely slept in the last few weeks and jumped at the slightest noise. She never expected that Tom would just arrive in broad daylight. But then, she wondered whether he had been spying on her and already knew for a long time where she was. She shuddered.

"Are you all right?" asked Caitrin, drying her hands. "Do you know them?" She peered out the window again.

Allison couldn't speak and shook her head. She wanted to say

something but didn't know what. Caitrin was already walking toward the door. Allison looked at her and then at Jenna, who was engrossed in her book. She carefully memorized her friends' faces and looked at them deliberately one last time. Then she went to her room. She couldn't say goodbye, that would need too much explanation, and she prayed they would understand.

She bumped into Evan, leaving her room. He held out her bag. "Do you need anything else?"

"How did you know?" Allison stared at him.

"Your reaction was impossible to miss. Besides, I was expecting someone to show up at some point. Your phone has also been so much quieter lately."

Allison took a deep breath. "Thank you," she said.

He held out another bag to her and said, "I packed your laptop, all the papers from your desk, and the USB sticks from the drawer. Is there anything else that needs to go in there?"

Confused, Allison shook her head, then realized what Evan had just done for her. "No," she said, "there's nothing left. Just the papers I put together for Caitrin, but they're harmless. What are you going to do with these?"

Evan closed the bag and said, "I'll take it to the castle. No one is allowed to go there and look for it. Besides, there are hiding places there that no one would find even if they were allowed to search the castle."

Relief flooded through Allison. Right at that moment, the doorbell rang. She flinched so much she almost dropped the bag.

Evan nodded. "You have to go," he said curtly.

Allison raced to the closet and took out the dress she had secretly removed from the closet on the top floor one night. She tucked the leather shoes she'd also stolen under her arm, as well as the cape she'd taken to be on the safe side. She was wearing a summer dress that was not at all suitable for the past, but she would change when she got to the stone. There was not enough time for more. She picked up her bag with the coins, the flint, the extra undergarment, and the small dagger she had bought and smiled at Evan. "Thank you," she said again.

"Thanks for what?" asked Jenna, suddenly standing in the doorway, frowning at them both. "Where are you going?"

Allison stared at her friend and tried to breathe, but it was difficult. She ran over to her and hugged her tightly. "You're the best friend in the world," she said, "and so is Caitrin. Please tell her that. And Lauren, too." Then she turned to Evan. "You're welcome to tell her everything."

"Tell me what?" asked Jenna, her voice sounding much more alarmed. She walked over to Evan and reached for his hand. Allison

was already at the door.

"Try to be back in a few days," Evan said. "If you arrive in the evening or at night, it should be safe."

"What's safe?" asked Jenna. "Damn it, can someone please answer my questions?"

Neither Evan nor Allison answered. She smiled at them again and then ran as fast as she could through the garden. Luckily, she had her sneakers on. Branches kept hitting her face and arms, and legs, but it didn't bother her. She almost expected to hear shouts behind her or someone chasing her, either Daniel's men or Jenna. But she heard nothing. At least she couldn't hear it over her panting breath.

She had memorized the path through the garden and had walked it over and over again, and once even ran, because she knew she would have to move quickly and maybe at night. When she reached the lawn, she ran even faster now that the path was clear. She ran over the bridge and onto the small path, and then she finally made it to the stone.

With trembling hands, she tried to open the bag but couldn't do it. Then it finally worked. She slipped off her sneakers and was about to change into her dress when she heard something. She paused and listened. She was sure it wasn't a seagull but people close by. And no matter who it was, they would try to stop her.

She made a quick decision.

Allison grabbed her sneakers and threw them into the bushes so they couldn't be seen. Then she opened the bag and pulled out the amulet from Caitrin's nightstand. She felt a little ashamed that she had stolen it, but remembering Caitrin doing exactly the same thing as a child and taking the amulet from her grandmother to travel, reassured her a little.

She was breathing so rapidly and intermittently that she could no longer listen for voices. She had no idea if someone was coming. But she had to get out of there, and right away.

Caitrin warned her against going back in time unprepared and had told her to be sure to wear the correct type of dress before leaving. You never knew what type of situation you might end up in, and it could be downright dangerous if you were not dressed correctly. But that was simply a risk Allison had to take right now.

She held the cloak, the dress, the shoes, and the bag in her hands. She could already feel the power of the stone and gripped the amulet tighter. For a brief moment, she thought about whether she really wanted to do this or whether it might not be better to turn herself in to the police. But no matter what happened, she would be fair game for Daniel. And eventually, he would take revenge on her; she knew that. That was why it was better to leave. Evan was right, she could

try to come back in a few days, and then they would discuss together what to do next.

Allison took a deep breath and placed the amulet in the notch on the stone. Her fingers began to tingle, and the tingling spread throughout her body. It trickled down her legs, traveled up her back, filled her head with a current, and traveled through her other arm, but nothing happened.

Allison heard herself sobbing and realized she was panicking. Why wasn't this working? Why was she still standing here with clothes under her arm trying to travel? Why wasn't it working?

Her whole body tingled, and then she remembered something Caitrin had mentioned. You had to place both hands on the amulet.

Allison took a deep breath, tucked the clothes between her knees and chin, and tried to get her right hand on the amulet as well. The moment she touched it, the circle closed like a circuit, and the tingling became a river and flowed through her. Allison couldn't breathe and was about to let go when she started to fall. She fainted, and then everything went black.

When she awoke, her head was pounding, and she was lying on the ground somewhere. She tried to get her bearings, and the first thing she noticed was a musty smell that almost made her nauseous. It was cold, and she was lying on something hard. She heard voices, but they were far away.

Cautiously, Allison opened her eyes. Her eyelids were heavy, like a hangover. She was really struggling to get her bearings. She vaguely perceived a faint light. Slowly, Allison sat up, and the hangover feeling intensified. She felt a little dizzy and propped herself up with one hand while grabbing her head with the other. The floor beneath her fingers was hard and probably made of stone. She was in a room dimly lit by torches.

Allison blinked, and now she could see that she was actually in a hallway. She straightened up further and tried to stand up. She noticed she was still wearing her summer dress. She was barefoot.

Staggering, she managed to get to her feet and hold onto the wall while she looked around. The corridor she had landed in was lost in darkness at both ends. Presumably, she was in the castle, but where exactly, she couldn't say.

Allison looked down at her feet and was amazed to see the bundle lying there. She had successfully taken the dress, shoes, and cape with her. Relief flooded through her. The amulet was still in her hand.

She thought of Caitrin's words, how she had said that the women never took off the amulet. It was now her turn to finally put it on. She slipped it over her head, and it rested securely on her chest, feeling warm. Immediately, Allison wondered how much energy was released when one traveled and if it was stored in the amulet. But then she shook her head and almost had to laugh a little at herself. She could worry about that some other time. Right now, it was important to change her clothes and to find out where she had ended up.

She looked around and saw that her bag had not made the trip. Maybe it had fallen off, or maybe sometimes it wasn't possible to take such things with her. Caitrin mentioned being able to take certain

items with her, but perhaps this bag was indeed too much. But at least she had the clothes, so that was good news.

Allison bent down carefully, trying to pick up her clothes. But the blood rushed to her head, making her even dizzy than she already was. Even her mouth felt dry like she was dehydrated from alcohol. Allison hadn't touched alcohol in weeks, though, because she wanted to make sure she was always ready to escape if needed.

She slowly made her way down the corridor, looking for a place to change. Briefly, she considered changing right there in the hallway, but since she could hear voices, people were obviously around. And no matter where she was or what time period, it certainly wouldn't be good if someone caught her here in her underwear or naked. That could be more dangerous than anything else.

The people she heard in the distance scared her a little, but at the same time, she was very curious about who they were. She really wanted to find out in which era she had landed. But that had to wait. Now it was time to get changed.

Allison looked around, wondering which way to go. There were no doors leading off the hallway. She decided not to go in the direction the voices were coming from.

She walked along the corridor, feeling her way against the wall and carefully placing her feet. She would have liked to use one of the torches, but she didn't dare. She briefly wondered if it had been a good idea to leave her sneakers behind, but then she remembered that she had the leather shoes. At least she could slip those on so she wouldn't step in anything disgusting.

Shortly, Allison found a small stairwell. A tiny staircase led up to the left. It didn't seem to be a staircase that people often used, so she decided to take a chance and use it. She had a feeling that if she went straight, she would be more likely to run into other people.

To her surprise, she found a small room at the bottom of the stairs, apparently used as a supply room for rags and linen. No one was in the room. This was perfect! Allison exhaled in relief, slipped inside, and pulled the door shut behind her.

She immediately went to a corner and stripped off her dress. She would have to hide it here somewhere. She was just thinking about what to do with her underwear since the undergarments that belonged to the dress from the past had been in the bag when she realized what had just happened. She had actually traveled to the past. That thought made her so nauseous she had to lean against the wall.

Again, she breathed deeply. In on four, hold your breath on four, exhale on four, hold your breath again on four, and immediately felt a little better. She felt deep joy and wonder at the thought that this time travel thing actually worked, and she would have loved to tell the

whole world about it right away. But on the other hand, she was filled with horror and simultaneously with deep gratitude to Caitrin for showing her this new world, a world she knew nothing about until now.

As the nausea subsided, she realized that she was still standing there almost naked. Allison decided to keep her cotton panties on and left the bra with her summer dress.

She slipped into the new dress and hoped fervently that she wouldn't attract attention. She had practiced putting the dress on often without any help because she had assumed she wouldn't have any help with her escape.

It worked quite well, and even with her trembling fingers, Allison finished closing the laces. She was about to slip into her leather shoes when she heard footsteps on the stairs. Allison froze, knowing that someone was heading right for this very chamber. She was trapped.

But she had to hide often enough in her professional life and had also conquered other impossible situations. One thing she knew how to do, was to keep a cool head.

She forced herself to calm down and looked around. Fortunately, there were many shelves, all stacked full of blankets. Allison gathered up all her clothes and slid into a corner behind a large pile of blankets. She tried not to breathe when the door opened. She wondered if it was a maid fetching linens. And if so, would she go to the pile right next to Allison?

But then she heard something else. It took a while to figure out, but then she understood. It was a hoarse, throaty laugh and kissing sounds. A pair of lovers had snuck into the room. Allison wasn't sure whether to be relieved about that. At least they wouldn't be looking through the stacks of linens if they were distracted. Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing after all that it wasn't a maid.

Something rattled and fell to the floor. Apparently, there was a lot of action going on in the room.

Allison kept very quiet. She didn't want her first encounter with people in the past to be such an embarrassing affair or to surprise anyone. She was fully aware that if these two had slipped into a room full of linens, they were sneaking around because otherwise, they would have just used a bed.

It was dark, but not as dark as it had been in the hallway. A very small window let in a little light. While Allison listened to the sounds of the two people in the room, she looked around. The blankets and sheets were neatly folded. They looked starched, and Allison wondered how much work that must be. She stayed as still as possible and barely even dared to breathe.

Once again, she heard something clanging, and a man's voice said

teasingly, "You're clumsy today."

Another voice laughed, and Allison frowned. It was not a woman.

"I don't want to talk," the other said, but it sounded rather gruff.

The moaning got a little louder, and Allison realized that two men were making love. No wonder they were doing it secretly. In that time, whatever time period it was, she knew it was certainly frowned upon and considered a sin.

Allison thought about how Caitrin had warned her that she could never know what type of situation she would get into when she traveled back in time. Now she understands what her friend had meant. God knows, Allison had not expected this situation. And she wasn't even dressed yet. This could be embarrassing.

But she would hang on waiting here until they were done. And from the sound of it, that wouldn't take much longer.

Something ran over her foot, and Allison flinched. She peered into the darkness but couldn't see anything. Then suddenly, it was there again, resting on her foot. And then it began to climb up her leg.

Disgust overwhelmed Allison, and she clenched her teeth so hard it hurt. She couldn't scream, she wasn't allowed to scream. She had no idea what it was, but it didn't feel good.

Finally, she couldn't stand it any longer and shook her leg as quietly as she could. At first, it didn't move; then, it crawled higher. Allison thought briefly that this would never have happened if she was wearing pants. She shook her leg harder, and it fell off. She put her foot down right on top of the creature. She didn't even know if it was a spider, a caterpillar, or some other insect, but it wasn't a mouse. She jumped a little bit to the side, bumping into a pile of linens. They began to wobble, but Allison propped them up with a quick flick of her wrist.

She hadn't made a sound, but when she stood still again, the room was totally quiet. She knew that they hadn't left. She could sense they were still in the room with her. And apparently, the men knew it now, too.

"Who's there?" a man's voice asked sharply.

"There's no one here," the other said reassuringly and almost even a little impatiently.

"Yes, there is," said the first. "I can even see them."

She heard clothes rustling, and the other one mumbled something.

Allison was so shaken that she completely froze. She stood there, hoping that the darkness would swallow her up. But of course, that didn't happen.

Suddenly, someone grabbed her by the arm and pulled her roughly out of the corner. She found herself facing a very muscular man who was almost a head taller than she was. He wore a kilt, but his shirt

hung loosely over it, and the ties on his collar were undone. Her mind briefly registered that he was quite handsome, but his face was contorted with anger. But she also saw fear in his expression. No wonder, after all, she had just caught him doing something for which he could be punished.

He held her with an iron grip. "What are you doing here?" he commanded.

Allison was still thinking about how to answer when he shook her again so roughly that her teeth chattered. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Now, she could see the other one, too. He was wearing pants, looked a little more disheveled, and was leaning casually against the shelf with his arms folded as if he was just waiting for the brief interruption to be over so they could continue.

Both men eyed her from top to bottom. "Is this one of your maids?" asked the second, who now began to tuck his shirt into his pants.

Allison tried to breathe but couldn't. The man's hand was clamped around her upper arm like a vise. She nodded.

"Were you eavesdropping?" asked the first man who held her.

"No," Allison groaned, but her voice sounded thin.

"She's lying," the second said, sounding rather bored. "What are you going to do to her now, and how long will it take?"

At that moment, Allison realized that she was in great danger. These two men had done something that was not allowed. Yes, it was not only frowned upon but forbidden and a sin. It could get you killed and could cost you all social standing. And she had witnessed it.

What would they do to her? She felt like the one holding her would have no qualms at all.

Allison realized she had to do something, or this could end badly for her. She tried to calm herself down. For years, she had taken classes in self-defense for women and martial arts. As a reporter who could find herself in dangerous situations at any time, it was important to be able to defend herself and preferably without a weapon. Over the past few weeks, she had watched all sorts of videos to bring herself back up to speed since those classes had been a few years ago. But the one thing she knew for sure was that she had to act quickly before he decided what he'd do to her.

"I've never seen her before." He turned to his lover. "Is she one of yours?"

This was the opportune moment. Without any real plan, Allison stepped on the foot of the man holding her and then, taking advantage of the moment of surprise when he turned to her dumbfounded, rammed her knee between his legs. Due to the fact that he was wearing a kilt, she didn't know exactly where his most sensitive region

was, but he was writhing in pain, so she must have hit it to some extent.

She wrested her arm from his grip, which had loosened considerably, and stormed past the men and down the stairs. But only a few moments later, she heard them behind her. They had recovered much faster than she had thought they would. Presumably, the men during this time were a bit more experienced in dueling than those in her own, where there were many more weapons at their disposal.

At the bottom of the stairs, she turned left toward the hallway where she had heard the voices before. If there were a lot of people there, they couldn't punish her or grab her in front of everyone. At least, that's what she hoped.

She ran as fast as she could, and fear drove her forward. Her skirts felt strange while running, but she gathered them up and had more legroom.

Allison heard footsteps behind her and guessed that the two could run faster than she could. And then she realized that only one was chasing her. Probably the one who had been holding her. He seemed the more battle-hardened. Damn.

As she ran, she went over everything she had learned in her self-defense classes. A few things came to mind, but she had no idea whether they would be of any use here. Because that had often involved kicking weapons out of men's hands and using those against them. Running away and being caught and fighting had never been part of the course.

Allison briefly considered whether it made more sense to stop and face him before he yanked her to the ground from behind, but she was so panicked that she couldn't stop.

At the end of the corridor, where it was getting brighter, she could just make out outlines of several men, most of them also wearing kilts. They had noticed her a long time ago and were staring at her and her pursuer. There was not a single woman among them. Oh God, hopefully, they weren't friends with this man who was hot on her heels right now. But if everything went south, she could always threaten to expose him, even if that could be very dangerous.

Still, she knew that this group of men was her only chance to escape. At this point, she could see that they were both amused and astonished.

She stopped abruptly when she reached the group. The men stared at her, and then her pursuer bumped into her so roughly it nearly knocked her to the ground. She staggered and just managed to hold onto one of the men, who eyed her in wonder. "Where to so fast?" he asked.

But Allison had no time to answer him or thank him for supporting

her. Her pursuer had already arrived and was reaching for her. "You're coming with me now," he said.

She shook her head and took a step backward. The other men moved aside. "I will not do that," she said, "I have done nothing to you."

She could hardly get the words out because her sides hurt so much.

"You're coming with me now anyway. I command you." He was panting after running so fast.

She crossed her arms in front of her chest, "You have no right to command me."

She heard some of the men in the group begin to talk.

"Who's the girl, Hamish?"

So, Hamish was his name, Allison thought, storing that information away.

"I don't know," he growled, taking another step forward to reach for her. Allison deftly dodged to the side, but in doing so, bumped into one of the other men, who grunted and moved away from her. "But I'll find out. Some new maid, probably. Or do any of you know her?"

His gaze wandered over the other men, but Allison didn't take her eyes off him for a second, knowing that he could attack her again at any moment. She also realized that none of the men knew her. They all seemed to know her attacker, though, and the way they acted showed that they had respect for him. But she also knew that she could not let this Hamish get hold of her alone.

And her opponent knew that, too. "These unruly women," he said almost jovially, and Allison realized he wasn't speaking to her but to the men. "This maid here, once again, didn't do what she was supposed to. She has..." He was thinking, and Allison was sure that only she realized that he was just making up a story. "She spilled the wine in my room, and now she won't clean it up. But she will."

He reached for her arm again, and Allison wondered if this was how maids were treated here.

"It can't be that bad," said one of the men. "Why don't you go get one of the other maids and stop wasting your time chasing this one around the castle?"

"It's getting to that point," he said. "But she needs to be taught some manners right now."

Two more men joined the group and were whispering about what was going on. Allison felt more and more embarrassed. Were there no women here she could turn to? None of these men would help her. They all just stared, fascinated. Only one, a newcomer, eyed her rather thoughtfully. There was something in his gaze that she could not interpret. Was it concern or compassion?

"I'm not a maid," she cried, "He's lying."

She heard laughter and wondered if she had done the right thing in traveling to this time.

He reached for her again, and Allison was about to jump back when she realized the wall was right behind her. She was trapped. He immediately grabbed her arm with a satisfied smile. "There. Now, you come with me."

"Hamish," said the man whom she had just noticed. He pushed his way forward and now stood beside them. Allison wondered if he could be an ally. He was as tall as Hamish and exuded an authority that the other men lacked. She wondered if he was the Laird. "I think it is beneath you to punish a maid. Leave that to someone else. Maude will know what to do. I can take this woman to her."

"No," Hamish replied. "I'll do that myself."

The man looked at Allison. His gaze was curious but not unpleasant. He was most definitely a leader. She had gained a lot of people skills in her years as a reporter. Most of the time, her story, and sometimes her safety, depended on reading people correctly. For a brief moment, he looked her in the eye, then his gaze drifted downwards, and Allison wondered if she had chosen the right dress for this time period. If only she could find a woman to see what they were wearing. But she couldn't change things now. She just had to get out of this situation in one piece.

His gaze wandered upward again, and for a heartbeat, lingered on the amulet. An untrained observer would certainly have thought he was simply staring into her cleavage, but she saw that his lips pressed together almost imperceptibly and crinkled his nose a tiny bit. Once again, he looked into her eyes, but his gaze had changed. It had become scrutinizing. He knew something. Then he turned back to Hamish, still clutching her arm.

"Besides, I don't think she's a maid. No one has ever seen her before. Perhaps she is one of the traveling folk who are giving their last performance. The dress definitely indicates that. None of our maids wear anything like this."

Hamish hesitated, and it seemed like he was considering the other man's arguments, but Allison knew he wasn't going to give in and let her go. After all, he wanted to silence her because she knew something that none of these men here even suspected.

Nevertheless, this man who had looked so closely at the amulet was her last hope.

She was feverishly thinking of what to say when she heard a horn being blown. All the men turned around. "Come on, Hamish," one man said. "Let her go. Let's go into the hall and fortify ourselves for the hunt. Your father is already asking where you are."

"You guys go ahead," Hamish said. "I'll be right there."

Most of the other men turned to leave. Only her advocate and three others, who were probably curious, stayed behind.

The horn sounded again, and an imperious voice called out. "Hamish!"

His grip loosened a bit, and Allison took advantage of that moment. She escaped and rammed her elbow into his torso, right where she thought his solar plexus was. He groaned and doubled over. For a moment, he seemed unable to breathe. Allison threw herself against him with all her strength, and he staggered backward, stumbling against the other men, and crashed down to the floor. When he hit the ground, he gave an indelicate grunt.

As if from far away, she heard the excited murmur of the other men. She gathered up her skirts and was about to run when his hand closed around her ankle and yanked her off her feet so quickly that she cried out in surprise. She crashed to the ground beside him, and as he was about to push her down with his powerful arms, she extended her index and middle fingers and stabbed him right in the eyes. He yelled out, staggered back, and let go of her.

Gasping, Allison jumped to her feet but got tangled up in her skirts and wasn't fast enough. With a roar, he threw himself at her and brought her down again. Allison lashed out and caught him on the temple with her elbow. He shook his head like a wounded bull and glared at her angrily.

Allison scrambled to her feet but couldn't run away because he was also on his feet, blocking her path. On the other side were all the men who had come back to watch the fight. Panting, she got into position, remembering how her martial arts instructor had always told her not to think but to let her body take the lead in a fight. Together with her subconscious, it would know what to do.

She casually got down on her knees and raised her arms, and if the situation hadn't been so serious, she would have waved Hamish on just like Bruce Lee in one of his movies, but she didn't dare. After all, her life was at stake here.

Then Hamish attacked again. He tried to use his bulk to pounce on her, but this was exactly the type of situation she had practiced in her self-defense classes. Men were often sure that they were superior to a woman just by virtue of their sheer physical strength, so she had to use a different strategy, namely, surprise. The beauty was that in this century, it was certainly easier than in modern time to surprise an attacker with a kung fu move.

As he lunged at her, she shifted her weight to her back foot, leaned backward, and kicked him in the chest. She almost cried out when the full weight of his body hit her foot. But he staggered backward and went down again. Even as he fell, there was anger on his face.

Although her foot hurt, Allison knew she had to run. Her only option was to go down the dark hallway, and she didn't know where it led. But she had to take that chance, so she gathered up her skirts and ran.

"Grab her," Hamish yelled, jumping to his feet.

She heard footsteps behind her, and then a hand closed tightly around her arm, slowing her down. She whirled around, raised her knee, attempting to kick the man who was reaching for her between the legs, but her attack didn't amount to much, and she staggered. She saw the determined face of the man in front of her who had just stood up for her. He had deftly dodged her attack.

She regained her balance and tried to ram her elbow into his chest, but he intercepted it and quickly turned her onto her back. With his other hand, he grabbed her left arm and held it as well. With two steps, he pushed her backwards until she was against the wall and he was directly in front of her. His hands were like vices, and Allison could only move her legs.

Although she was in such an awkward position, she continued to try to use her knees or at least step on his foot. But he pressed himself tightly against her so that she couldn't move. Almost like lovers, it occurred to Allison, yet this was a fight for her freedom and perhaps more.

His face was so close to hers that she made one last attempt and leaned forward to bite him. But he only raised his eyebrows and leaned back just out of reach.

"And all because of some spilled wine?" he asked quietly.

Allison gritted her teeth. "Leave me alone."

Once again, his eyes wandered to her neck where the amulet lay. He looked into her eyes questioningly, but he didn't ask. What did he want to know? How did he know the amulet?

"Bring her here, Cailean," Hamish shouted. Allison began to panic as the man loosened his grip a little, but only enough to allow her to move, not to break free.

"Please," she said softly. "You must not give me to him."

The man, whose name was Cailean, looked at her appraisingly but then pulled her along with him. "I have no choice," he said so quietly that the men further down the hall could not hear him.

"He's going to kill me," Allison breathed. "Please."

He seemed to be a man who was at least open to argument.

"He won't."

Cailean slowly pulled her forward, and Allison would have liked to fall to the ground just to avoid ending up in Hamish's grip again.

"How do you know?"

"Because I won't let him."

"Then let me go."

"You won't get far."

Allison realized he was right, but what else could she do?

Relentlessly, he pulled her forward while the men watched them. Some grinning, others astonished, and some even angry. But Hamish's face was a mask of rage. A chill ran down Allison's spine.

"I know something about him that I shouldn't know. He's not going to let me get away with it."

She didn't know where the words had come from, and she didn't know if she could trust this man, but it was her only chance.

He slowed his step a little. "Act as if you're trying to free yourself."

"What?" gasped Allison.

"Go ahead."

Allison squirmed in his grip and freed one arm. Then she kicked him. He dodged her, releasing her other arm in the process, and with a twist, Allison broke free. Then she ran again.

Within a few steps, he reached her and knocked her down from behind so that they both fell. Allison screamed in rage as he grabbed her hands again, and she couldn't move. "What was that all about?" she hissed, "You were never going to let me get away."

"Hush," he said, slowly pulling her up. "I needed a little more time. What do you know about him?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Yes, you can, quickly."

They stood again, and he bent her arms behind her back, though not in a way that hurt. "Trust me."

But she could not. "Let me go. Please."

"He is the Laird's son. You cannot escape."

Allison stared at Hamish, who was watching her, waiting for the hunting spoils to be brought to him. If he was the Laird's son, her situation was even worse than she had thought. He possessed power, and especially as a future Laird. He was not allowed to love men. She closed her eyes for a moment. "Shit," she muttered in English.

"You're English?" asked Cailean, starting to move again, very slowly though.

She shook her head, annoyed at her mistake. "Scottish," she said in Gaelic.

They approached the group of men again.

"Tell him that you are one of the jesters and that you got lost in the castle looking for the kitchen."

"Why should I..." she asked, but he interrupted her.

"Say it. Trust me."

Then they were within earshot of each other, and she felt Cailean take on a different posture. Hamish was not only sizing her up but

him as well.

"She's really a tough one," Cailean said. "I've never seen a woman fight like that. A maid certainly can't do that."

He was preparing the ground for her, Allison noted.

"Well done, Cailean," one of the men said. "At least someone conquered her."

Hamish gave the man an angry look, and Cailean groaned softly so that only Allison heard.

Hamish snorted. "Give her to me."

"I think she should just go back to her people," Cailean objected.

"And who exactly are her people?" asked Hamish.

Allison took a deep breath. "I'm one of the jesters. I was looking for the kitchen and got lost." She hesitated, then added, "I perform as a fighter. That's why I can do this."

If she was going to play this role, she was going to play it right.

Hamish stared at her with narrowed eyes. She could see him considering his options. She was still a danger to him.

"Come on, Hamish, you've got more important things to do than take care of one of the traveling folk. For example, you wanted to lead the hunt today and finally kill that boar you've been telling me about for years," Cailean said almost casually.

Hamish looked at Allison again and seemed to wrestle with himself. "I don't want you or your people in the castle anymore. Never again. Get out of here and move elsewhere. Today. If I see you or any of the others, here again, you will fare badly."

Allison was flooded with relief, but when she realized that she had just been banished from the castle and by the Laird's son, her heart began to race. What if the stone was in the castle? How was she supposed to get to it then?

"Do you want me to let her go?" asked Cailean.

Hamish nodded. "Now, see that you leave. Angus, take two men, go with her, and see that the group takes down their tents and leaves as quickly as possible."

One of the men who had been watching stepped forward and nodded.

Allison turned to Cailean and raised her eyebrows pleadingly. She wanted him to go with her. She had so many questions, and he seemed like someone who could answer at least some of them. After all, he had just helped her.

When he caught her gaze, he shook his head slightly and averted his eyes. Then he let go of her and stepped over to Hamish. He gave her another long look, and she wondered what it meant, but she couldn't figure it out. Angus then grabbed her by the arm and pulled her down the dark hallway.

"Be careful she doesn't get away from you. When I go out hunting later, I don't want to see any more of those scoundrels on my land," Hamish shouted.

"Yep," Angus said, holding her a little tighter.

Allison would have liked to shake him off. She was getting tired of being grabbed by men. But apparently, she had no other choice. At least Angus wasn't planning to kill her. At least she hoped not. Still, she had another problem now. She had to find the stone and was not allowed to visit the castle.

She decided that she wanted to leave. She would rather deal with Daniel Walden, who was in prison, than stay here.

All the way to the courtyard, Allison pondered what to do. If these traveling folk, who were apparently giving a performance right here, were sent away, they would move on to somewhere in the Scottish Highlands. But she couldn't go with them because the gate was here. Besides, she didn't know these people at all. And they probably wouldn't take her with them. And then what? Would Angus quickly find out that she wasn't a member of the group after all? And would he tell Hamish?

When they stepped into the castle courtyard, it took her a moment to find her bearings, but then she was amazed to realize how familiar the castle was to her, even during this time period. They had exited at the north end of the castle courtyard. The castle was intact and looked even more imposing than in her own time. The castle courtyard was full of people and animals. Smaller huts were nestled against the mighty walls. One appeared to be a blacksmith shop. Another was apparently used for baking. There were stables for the horses and even storage barns.

There was no grass in the castle courtyard, similar to modern time, but you could see the earth, which was trampled flat. In some places, it was even a little muddy, and pigs and chickens were rooting in the dirt.

A temporary stage was in the middle of the courtyard, but it was being dismantled. Around it stood three smaller wagons pulled by shaggy horses. People in colorful dresses were walking around, and Allison assumed they were the traveling people she was now to leave with.

Her throat tightened.

Angus pulled her forward, but Allison would have preferred to stop and look at everything in peace. She needed more information so she could develop a plan. She had been up here so many times in the past few weeks and had memorized everything. That helped her now. Over there was the spot where she had most enjoyed sitting to study the castle. Now, there was a hay rack and hitching rings for horses in the

wall.

If she had needed any more proof that she had landed in the past, here it was.

"You can let me go now," she said to Angus, who hadn't uttered a word yet.

To her surprise, he did just that, almost as quickly as if he had burned himself on her. She rubbed her arm. By now, it was extremely sore from all these men grabbing her there.

Angus scowled at her from under bushy eyebrows. "Tell your people to dismantle and leave. If not, I will."

He stopped and motioned for her to keep walking. Allison knew she had no choice, so she squared her shoulders and walked slowly toward the people in the colorful dresses, with Angus's gaze burning into her back. Apparently, the traveling people were already taking down the tent, and they seemed to be in a hurry.

Allison frowned. Hadn't this Cailean said that they were preparing their final performance?

She noticed a man in green pants who had paused in his work and was scowling at her. Allison held her breath. It was the man who was in the utility room with Hamish. So, he was one of the traveling folk, then. She wondered if he had arranged for his people to dismantle quickly because he sensed something was brewing. For him, she was still a danger. She had to be careful, but she could also use this to her advantage.

She gathered her courage and waved him over so that she could talk to him alone. His expression became even more suspicious, but then he looked around and came over quite quickly. Allison noticed a woman who had stood up and was eyeing them suspiciously.

"What do you want?" he asked as he stood in front of her. "Leave us alone."

"Hamish wants you to dismantle and get out of the castle today. And you shall never come back," Allison delivered the message.

"We're already dismantling. Now get out of here."

Allison shook her head. "You'll have to take me with you."

The man frowned. "I don't think so. We don't know you."

"Then at least pretend."

"Certainly not."

He was about to turn away, but the blonde woman who had been watching their conversation the whole time stomped over to them.

"Damn," the man muttered.

Allison saw the woman's incensed expression and took her chance. "Is she your wife?"

He gritted his teeth. "That's none of your business."

"So yeah. Take me with you, just out of the castle. As soon as we're

out of sight, I'll leave."

"No," he said.

"Yes, you will, or your wife will find out what you did in that room."

His face darkened, and when Allison saw the flash of fear, she knew she had hit the mark.

The next moment his wife was standing next to him and grabbed his arm. "What does she want, Bo?" she asked.

"Nothing. We're just giving her a ride for a bit."

Allison breathed a sigh of relief.

The woman eyed her from top to bottom. "What do you mean *for a bit*? So that you can fuck her again at our next stop? That's what you were doing back at the castle, wasn't it? Do you want me to take your mistress with us now too?"

She spat on the floor in front of her.

Startled, Allison stared at her. She had not expected such rudeness.

He growled and hunched his shoulders. "She doesn't interest me. The Laird wants us to take her with us."

His wife seemed unconvinced and was looking suspiciously at Allison. "I don't care what he wants. They didn't pay well anyway. We're certainly not coming back here. So why should we do him a favor?"

Allison bit her lip, then said, "I only want to ride along until we're out of sight."

"And then, sweetie?"

"And then I'll get out and make my own way."

"And I'm supposed to believe that? Who are you anyway?"

Allison looked at the man, who was still eyeing her with hostility. "I'm afraid I got involved with the Laird's son, and now he wants me to leave. And you are my only chance to get out of here. I'm asking you woman to woman."

All of a sudden, the stranger laughed. "Never spread your legs for any of these guys. When they get tired of you, they'll treat you worse than the last dog. You know that." She looked at Allison again. "All right, come along. But you better not make eyes at our men. And you get off in the woods up ahead, and then I never want to see you again."

Allison nodded in relief. "Thank you."

The woman grumbled something and turned away. Her husband stared at Allison for a moment longer, and there was a warning in his gaze. Allison shook her head slightly. She'd be damned if she was going to betray him if she had to depend on these people now.

The dismantling of the stage was well underway, and almost everything else seemed to be packed up as well. Allison didn't dare to

offer her help but mingled with the people because she knew Angus was still watching her. She wanted him to think that she was one of the traveling people.

In her head, however, Allison was making plans, though they were rather confused and vague since she had no idea where the stone or the gatekeeper were or even where to look for them. Jenna and Caitrin had told her that one did not always arrive directly at the stone when traveling. That meant it might be in the castle, or it might not. It would be best if she could search for where the stone might be today. No, better to look where it was in modern time, she decided. Her head ached, and slowly, exhaustion enveloped her like a lead-heavy blanket. But she was not out of danger yet and had to stay alert.

She would have preferred to climb one of the towers to see in which direction Caitrin's house would later be built. Then she could locate the spot where the stone lay. That's where she could start looking. But of course, no one would allow her to climb any of the towers, and she didn't dare move away from the group of jesters.

Finally, they finished, and everyone was set to leave. Allison was pinned in the back of a wagon between the woman who had insulted her so much and some kind of sack. The jesters shouted something to each other in a language Allison didn't understand, and then the horses walked on.

For a brief moment, panic spread through Allison. At least she knew her way around the castle, but what would be waiting for her out there? And how far should she go? Whenever she had been at home doing research, she at least had had money, a credit card, and her phone and could have contacted someone to help her at any time. But she had none of that now. She was completely on her own. She had totally underestimated this fact and what it would mean for her. Suddenly she was no longer as self-confident as she had always been in front of Caitrin.

Angus was still watching her, but as soon as the wagon reached the gate, he turned and walked back into the castle.

For a moment, Allison stared at the spot where her guard had just been standing, then knew this was an opportunity. She slid forward and jumped off the wagon.

"Leave it, girl," the woman said. "He's not worth it."

Allison shook her head. The wagon was already moving away, and she made her way toward a small door in the wall. This had been preserved in her time, and she knew that there was access to an entire wing that had probably been used—or rather, was now being used—for storage. She could hide there for the time being and think about what to do next.

But then she remembered something. She ran after the wagon until

she was level with the woman. "What year is it?"

The woman's eyebrows shot up. "What year?"

Allison nodded. The wagon was already rumbling through the gate. "Please tell me. What year is it?"

"1589." The woman stared at Allison's neck. Then her gaze jerked back up. Recognition was in it, and it transformed her face completely. Concern was now mingled in her gaze. "Take care of yourself, girl. And have a safe trip," she said.

Allison stopped and stared at her as the wagon slowly pulled away. The woman looked at her, and the expression on her face had turned mild. She smiled briefly, then the wagon was gone, and Allison stood alone in the middle of the yard, still stunned by what the woman had just said.

The guards at the gate looked at her questioningly after she had run to the wagons, but Allison shook her head and walked over to the supply rooms.

"You're one of them," one of the guards shouted.

Allison's heart was pounding, but she made an effort to answer calmly. "No, I work here. Maude hired me yesterday."

That seemed to be enough for the man because he just nodded and closed the gate.

Allison ran to the small door, opened it, and slipped inside. The room was dark, but she could vaguely make out large boxes and bags. It was, in fact, a supply room. Allison leaned against the wall and lowered herself to the floor because her legs could no longer support her. Besides, her foot hurt after that martial arts kick against Hamish.

1589. That could not be true. But even worse was that the woman jester had apparently known who and what she was. She had recognized the amulet and wished her a good journey. Everything about her had changed. Suddenly, she had been sympathetic to Allison. What if this woman could have helped her find the stone?

Allison had to resist the urge to run after the wagon. Tears welled up in her eyes. Had this been her only chance to return home? Was that why this Cailean had sent her to the jesters? Because he knew they could help her?

She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. That wouldn't help. She had to find the stone here. If it had brought her here, surely it must be somewhere nearby.

Perhaps she should consider wearing her amulet more openly so that people who knew about it could recognize her and lead her to the stone. Already, two people had recognized the amulet and behaved fairly toward her. If there were others, they would surely help her too.

Allison knew she had to search among women because, according to Caitrin, it was only women who could travel. Evan was living proof

that men could travel, too, but she was more likely to find a woman who could help her rather than a man.

But then she remembered that Cailean had also recognized the amulet. Or had she imagined that? In any case, he had tried to protect her and keep Hamish away from her, which he had succeeded in doing. Perhaps it would be best if she talked to him before she started looking for the stone on her own and possibly putting herself in danger again. After all, who knew what lurked outside the castle walls?

Allison rested her head in her arms and tried to breathe. She could hear sounds from outside the castle, both familiar and unfamiliar. She heard shouting, laughing, cursing, the clucking of chickens, hammering, and above that, the screaming of seagulls.

Allison rarely worried, but at that moment, she did. She should have listened to Caitrin. Coming here was insanity. But while she had been sitting at her laptop reading about Sabrina, the housekeeper in her time, it had seemed so logical to choose this path. Now it seemed like the worst possible choice. And suddenly, all she wanted to do was return home. She would love to sit with Jenna, Caitrin, and Evan tonight and laugh about what had happened to her here. And it could be possible. If she found the stone, she could leave anytime and be home by evening.

But that also meant she had to go in search of the stone. It would be evening soon, and then she was sure she wouldn't be able to find it. The good thing was that she had found a safe place here in the pantry, where she could hide overnight if necessary.

Suddenly she heard voices shouting orders in the courtyard. Allison listened intently. What was happening there? It seemed as if many men were gathering. Then she remembered, hadn't they been talking about a hunt?

She sat up. This was good! When the men and Hamish left the castle, she could look around in peace. She had already noticed one important thing. There were so many people living here that a new face wouldn't attract much attention. She had underestimated that. She had always thought that living in a castle would be like one big family, with everyone knowing everyone. But apparently, that wasn't the case. And she would take advantage of that.

Her heart pounding, she waited until the men had left the castle courtyard, which took much longer than she had thought it would. But finally, it was quiet again.

Slowly, she opened the door and stepped into the courtyard. No one paid any attention to her. Only a chicken looked at her attentively

but then resumed scratching in the dirt.

Allison had thought it would be best to pretend she knew where she was going and knew her way around. And basically, she did know her way around.

She marched straight across the yard, and although she really wanted to lower her head, she kept her chin up and even greeted the blacksmith who looked over at her. He nodded back and then turned back to his work. Relieved, she exhaled.

Allison slipped into the door of the north tower through which she had come earlier with Angus. Then she went back up the stairs and followed the hallway that appeared to run along the northwest wall. Soon she arrived at the small staircase leading to the laundry room. Allison hesitated for only a brief moment, then mustered all her courage and descended the stairs. She wanted at least to hide her clothes properly and see if there was anything else there she could use.

But except for her cape, which would only hinder her right now, there was nothing left. She stuffed her summer dress and bra under a pile of cloths and then started looking again.

Carefully, she made her way through the castle, which was surprisingly empty. She hardly met anyone, and those she did, paid no attention to her.

But she did not find the stone either. It was probably either kept in a private room, somewhere in the basement or outside. She really had to see an overview of the surroundings.

However, she couldn't find the stairway to any of the towers either. All the stairs to the top ended in front of closed doors.

Slowly, time was running out. How long would such a hunt take? The men would surely return before nightfall. Fortunately, it was summer, and the sun didn't set until half-past nine. At least, that was how it had been in her time. She had never seen a clock anywhere here, so she had no idea what time it was.

Eventually, she arrived at the Great Hall for the third time. The benches and tables were arranged as she had seen them before in a historical film. They stood in a large U, and in front, there was a kind of raised platform holding another huge table and benches. Presumably, the Laird sat there with his family.

Allison shuddered at the thought of Hamish. If he caught her here, she would have a bad time.

A maid came into the hall, placed a tray with a pitcher and two cups on the large table, and eyed Allison curiously. Then she gave a jerk and came toward her. Allison's breath caught, and she considered turning and walking away, but it was too late for that. So, she stood as straight as possible and lifted her chin. Her heart was beating up to

her throat, and she hoped the maid didn't notice how nervous she was.

The young woman curtsied to her. "Can I get you anything, my lady?"

Allison stared at her. "Bring me something?"

The maid nodded. "It will be a while before the men are back from the hunt. There will be no supper before then. That's what you came down for, isn't it?"

Allison bit her lip. She would have preferred to refuse because the fewer interactions she had with the people here, the safer she'd be. But she also knew that not eating wouldn't help her, and she didn't know how much longer the search for the stone would take. Who knew when she would next be offered something to eat.

"That would be very kind," she said.

The maid nodded again. "I'll bring something right away. But it's only cold meat and a little bread."

Allison nodded. "That's good enough for me, thanks."

When the maid disappeared, Allison sank down on one of the benches, relieved. The men would stay away a little longer. That was good to know. So she still had time. However, she didn't know where else to look. Should she dare look outside for the stone? But what if she couldn't get back into the castle and had to spend the night outside? She wondered whether there might be a village where she could go. But what if she ran into the hunting party? She shuddered at the thought.

Allison let her eyes wander through the hall. The walls were decorated with huge tapestries depicting biblical scenes and battles. The floor was covered with rushes, and the tables were scrubbed clean. It actually seemed quite homey. At least friendlier than she had imagined.

What should she do now? Should she retreat back to the storeroom and start searching outside the castle walls first thing in the morning? But actually, she wanted to return home right now and not tomorrow.

Should she ask the maid if she knew anything? But it was better not to be too obvious. If the maid started asking questions about who she was, she had no answer for that. All she knew was what year it was and that the Clan Maclean lived here. They had always held this castle, as Caitrin had told her several times, at least until the English had used it as a garrison in 1745. She couldn't very well pretend to be a Maclean.

Her eyes fell on one of the carpets depicting a scene of a knight holding a sword and threatening a man who was attacking with his horse. Behind the man with the sword stood a lady. It reminded her of Cailean and how he had protected her earlier.

Allison bit her lower lip. And what if she tried to quietly talk to

him again? Apparently, the amulet meant something to him. And he had behaved very honorably by protecting her. At the same time, he had been quite cunning and had manipulated Hamish. He seemed to be different from the other men. He would certainly not turn her away if she asked him for help. At least she hoped he wouldn't. He was most likely hunting now with the other men, but later she might try to get him alone. The risk was enormous, but he was her best chance to find the stone.

She was just beginning to formulate a plan when the maid returned with a tray of cold roast and bread and some pickled fruit that looked like pears. She set the tray down in front of her. "Enjoy your meal, my lady. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Allison shook her head. "No, thank you." But then she hesitated. "Can you tell me where I can find the chamber of Cailean..." damn it, she didn't know his last name. "Cailean?"

The maid frowned, and Allison wondered if perhaps she didn't know him. "You must not go there, my lady."

Allison's smile froze. She hadn't thought of that at all. The customs were so different here. "I don't want to go either, but he left something for me there, and I wanted to take advantage of the time he's not here to retrieve it."

The maid shook her head. "Better not, my lady. If the Laird finds out, I told you where Cailean sleeps, I'll be in big trouble."

Allison smiled. "I wouldn't want that. And I don't want to get in trouble either. I'll ask him later when he's back from hunting."

The maid looked relieved and curtsied. "I have to go back to the kitchen."

She turned away and hurried away.

When Allison was alone again, she propped her elbows on the table and buried her face in her hands. The fact that a woman wasn't allowed to just see a man alone didn't make any of this easier. Christ, who had thought up such nonsensical rules? She didn't want anything immoral from him, only to find out if he could tell her where the stone was.

She knew that she would not be able to go into the hall later after the hunting party returned. And it would be difficult to wait for Cailean anywhere else. So, she decided to search for his room on her own. At least no one would look for her or suspect her there, and she might be able to talk to him undisturbed, even if it was in the middle of the night. And if she was lucky, she would manage to be alone in a room with a man without immediately fainting from the immorality.

She grabbed the tray and stood up. By now, she had seen several women around and observed that the maids' dresses were much simpler than her own. They were usually made of coarse woolen

fabric in muted colors and high collars. Hers, on the other hand, was cut out, had a few laces in the front as well as the back, and was made of a finer dark blue woolen fabric that stood out against the gray and brown of the maids. Her dress was not as colorful as the jesters', but neither was it as plain as the maids'. She had not yet seen a noblewoman, but apparently, the maid had mistaken her for one. Perhaps she could pass for a better maid or some kind of governess if she tried hard enough.

She went into the hallway and looked around. Where might the private rooms be?

A boy carrying a heavy bucket of water came down the hallway and nodded to her.

"Good afternoon," she said, "I'm new here, and I'm supposed to bring food to a Cailean's room. Can you tell me where I might find that?"

The boy raised his eyebrows, and Allison was already bracing herself for the next lecture, but he pointed to a stairway with his free hand. "second floor, on the left, the first door." He nodded again and continued walking.

Allison waited another minute until she was sure she was all alone, then headed toward the stairs. She hoped the directions were correct because she had no idea how to tell if he actually lived there or not.

There was no one up there either, and she quickly found the door. She knocked and waited a moment, but of course, no one opened.

Her heart racing, she grabbed the handle and pushed open the heavy wooden door. "Is anyone there?" she asked quietly. "I'm just bringing something to eat."

But no one answered her. The room was deserted. Relieved, Allison slipped inside, put the tray on the floor, and closed the door again. Then she looked around.

A massive bed with heavy curtains tied back with a cord dominated the room. Otherwise, there was only a wash bowl, a brazier that was not lit, and a leather bag standing next to a chest where countless papers were scattered. A quill pen and an inkwell lay on the floor. Men's clothes lay on the bed—a shirt, trousers, and a cloak.

For some reason, Allison felt like she had landed in the right room, even if she didn't know exactly why.

She walked carefully over to the chest and looked at the papers. It was probably an occupational hazard that her first inclination was always to examine any written documents. It was not paper but parchment, she realized. Real paper probably didn't exist yet, but she didn't know that for sure. Some of the writing was closely inscribed. They didn't appear to be correspondence, however, because there was

no salutation or date. Allison had a hard time deciphering the writing. It was small, narrow, and so ancient. But then her eye caught a word, and she frowned. *Merci*, it said. French?

Now other words also made more sense. *Vous, temps, rapport*. The document was actually written in French. How interesting. She had not expected that here.

A horse whinnied in the yard, and Allison's heart beat faster. She wondered if the men had returned. Cautiously, she went to the window. It only had a curtain, no glass. It was open right now, letting in the air of the balmy summer evening.

Allison risked a glance out the window. It didn't lead to the courtyard. She could only see a piece of the castle wall, trees, and the sea in the distance. She tried to orient herself but didn't know exactly which tower she was in or which direction she was looking. Everything she had used to orient herself was gone. The pole on the road to Glensada, the village of Larachbeg, Caitrin's house, and the pasture with the sheep. None of that was here anymore—or not there yet. She only saw trees and bare hills behind them. A column of smoke rose between the trees, and she wondered if that was where the village was that Jenna and Caitrin had told her about.

There had to be some clue. She leaned out the window and tried to peer around the corner of the tower. She saw a bit of the courtyard, and then she noticed the setting sun. Of course, that was it! She could take her bearings from the sun. It was setting in the west, which meant she was in the eastern of the four towers. From here, she was looking directly in the direction where Caitrin's house would be built later. But there was nothing there. Normally, you could see the garden from this tower. And it also meant that the stone could be there in this sea of trees.

Allison had no idea how she was supposed to search all this. And above all, without attracting attention.

Discouraged, she turned away from the window. Her eyes fell on the food. She took the tray and carefully sat down on the bed since there was no other place to sit except on the floor. It felt strangely intimate to sit on the bed of a man she didn't even know.

She tried the bread, which tasted almost of nothing, and then some of the meat, which had a surprisingly strong flavor that Allison enjoyed. In combination with the bread, it was excellent. Carefully, she smelled the liquid in the cup. It appeared to be ale. She sipped it and realized at the same time how thirsty she was. She emptied the cup in several large gulps. She was sure it contained some alcohol and hoped it wouldn't go to her head on an empty stomach. Quickly she ate some more.

It wasn't as easy to find something to drink here as it was in

modern times. At home, she would have just poured herself a glass of water from the tap. That wasn't possible here.

Suddenly, she heard voices on the stairs and a loud thump. Allison jumped up and was thinking about what to do when she heard them right outside her door, but luckily they moved away again.

They were men. Were they back? She definitely needed a plan. She couldn't let him see her right away when he came into the room, whenever that might be.

There weren't many places to hide, that much was clear. She could either hide in bed behind the curtains, under the bed, behind the door or maybe behind the chest. Everything had advantages and disadvantages, and she always had to leave the option of escape open. Hiding in the bed was totally out of the question. And she could be easily trapped under the bed. She couldn't fit behind the chest. So, the only hiding place left was behind the door.

Again, she heard laughter and footsteps on the stairs. So then the men were indeed back.

Allison hastily got up and slid the tray under the bed. She cleaned up the depression that had formed when she sat on the feather bed and waited behind the door.

What would she say to him?

She didn't have much time to think about it, because only a few moments later she heard voices again and this time she thought she heard his name. The next moment, the door swung open, and she heard someone enter the room. Allison tried not to breathe, but her heart was pounding so loudly she thought he must be able to hear it.

He left the door open so she still had some protection but couldn't see him either. She could hear him doing something. It sounded like cloth rustling, but she couldn't place it exactly. Then she heard water being poured into the basin, and he took a deep breath.

A voice right next to Allison, but on the other side of the door, suddenly said, "Hurry up, dinner's about to start."

"I'm coming," Cailean replied, "Go ahead."

"Why did you change your clothes?" the other asked.

Allison did not breathe and prayed that no one would notice her.

"The plaid was covered in blood. I don't want to appear like that at dinner."

"But it was a hunt," the other said, rather amused. "That's where things get bloody. Or are you too fine for that now?"

There was silence for a moment. "I'll be right there. Go on."

The other man growled something, and then the footsteps moved away.

Cailean groaned in annoyance. And then she saw him sitting on the bed, now wearing pants, and about to slip into his boots.

Breathless, she looked at him. Should she say something? All of a sudden, this plan seemed completely nonsensical to her. What was she doing here in the room of a man she didn't know and who could well be dangerous to her?

Cailean paused mid-motion and seemed to listen. He had already tied one boot and had just slipped into the other. He just sat there and didn't move. Then he slowly raised his head and looked around, first behind him to the bed, then to the chest, then into the hallway. And then, after what felt like an eternity, his eyes met hers.

Allison was shaking so much she couldn't say anything. Slowly, he got up, walked over to the door, and closed it quietly. Then he turned and stood directly in front of her, his hand still on the door handle. His expression was serious. "At least you've saved me a search."

Allison blinked in confusion. "Excuse me?" she croaked in more of a stutter since she was shaking so much.

He pointed to his boots. "I was just getting ready to look for you."

She relaxed a little but realized that she was now trapped in his room. She tried to focus on what he was saying. "Why?"

"Because I need to talk to you."

Slowly, the tension drained from her body, but her knees went weak, and she had to brace herself against the wall. "And I wanted to talk to you too," she said.

He frowned. "It's not a good idea for you to sneak in here, though. Did anyone see you?"

She remembered the boy and shook her head. It was not a lie because the child had not seen her go into the room.

He seemed to notice her hesitation. "It would have been better if we could have talked outside near the jesters."

Allison shrugged. "But it's private in here, too, right?"

His frown deepened, and she wondered if he found it offensive when she said things like that.

He turned away wordlessly and pushed the latch forward. Something about that sound made her stomach tie in knots. But she couldn't let on. She watched him walk across the room, rubbing his hands over his forehead. At the window, he stopped.

As she had noted earlier in the day, he was tall and muscular. His athletic figure, which showed to advantage even better in pants than in his kilt, was on par with a top athlete from modern times. He was well trained and battle-hardened. She had noticed that today too. He wore his hair rather short for this time, and it wasn't dark brown, as she had thought this afternoon, but more the color of chestnuts.

Now he turned, "What did you want to talk to me about?"

Allison's hand went to the amulet, and she saw that he noticed it immediately. He pressed his lips together again. There was something he didn't like about it. What was it?

"You recognize this amulet, right?"

He didn't answer but just stared at her and seemed to be waiting for her to continue speaking.

She cleared her throat. "How do you know it?"

"I didn't say I knew it."

He had, though, with his body language. And he was aware of that, and so was she. He just didn't want to answer her question.

"I'm looking for this symbol," Allison said. "And I thought you could help me."

He raised his eyebrows. "I don't think I can."

Allison bit her lower lip, wondering how to proceed. Apparently, he didn't want to talk about it. Or at least, not yet.

"So that means you didn't want to talk to me about the amulet. Then why were you looking for me?"

For quite a while, he just stared at her, and his gaze was so intense that Allison began to feel uncomfortable. Had she misjudged him? Did he want something completely different? Was that why he locked the door?

She immediately tensed up and wondered whether she had placed herself in a dangerous situation.

She glanced at the latch and considered whether she'd be able to release it and open the door before he could reach her. But she realized that would be impossible. All he had to do was take three long steps across the room, and she would never have enough time. And if she had to fight him, her chances would be even worse up here than down there in the hall.

She broke out in a sweat, feeling trapped.

He followed her gaze and shook his head. "You don't have to be afraid. I won't hurt you."

He sounded sincere, but Allison still couldn't really relax. "Then what do you want?" She crossed her arms in front of her chest, but that only gave her a little security.

He, too, folded his arms and regarded her thoughtfully. "What do you know about Hamish? Why was he so angry with you?"

Allison jutted her chin. "That's why you wanted to look for me?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "One of the reasons."

"And why else?"

Again, he didn't answer and just looked at her. Jesus, that look from those light brown eyes was really unnerving.

"It seemed like you could use some help."

"I can. But apparently, you don't want to give it to me."

"How exactly can I help you?"

Allison took a deep breath. "Exactly what I said before. I'm looking for this symbol. It has to be somewhere in this castle or around here."

She didn't want to tell him about the stone yet.

His expression shut down again. "How about you tell me what you know about Hamish first?"

Allison raised an eyebrow. "If I did, I'd be back to square one."

He frowned, and she realized that she had used an expression from more recent times. But he had understood. "I'm afraid you have no choice if you want me to help you."

Allison was not intimidated that easily. She had negotiated for information more times in her life than he had, of that she was sure. "Why is it so important for you to find out what I know about this Hamish?"

He smiled a little, and his attractive face changed. He seemed almost mischievous, and he looked even better. "Because I've never seen him so angry."

"And that's the only reason? That's why you wanted to look for me with the jesters after nightfall?"

His smile deepened. "As I understand from what you're saying, you also know how valuable your information is. For that, I'd ride through a balmy summer evening in search of a stranger."

Allison took a deep breath. "Are you aware that I won't give you the information so easily? After all, it guarantees my safety here."

He raised an eyebrow. "Does it?"

"Yes, because until you know what it is, you will help me. And before you ask, yes, the information is worth it."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "This isn't the first time you've played this game."

She almost replied that this was her job and information was her life, but she bit her tongue just in time. "I don't think you have either."

He thought for a moment. "And what if I promise to protect you even after you give me the information?"

Allison shook her head. "To be sure of your intentions, I'd need to know you better, and I don't."

Something flashed in his eyes, but then he quickly averted his gaze.

What had that been? She had to admit that she found him interesting. He was her intellectual equal, sharp-witted, humorous, and at the same time, a warrior who fit well in the Highlands in his kilt. Now, wearing pants, he looked different but damned attractive, both in the kilt and in pants. But she stopped herself from those kinds of thoughts. After all, she would be gone again in a few days, or

hopefully, hours. And the last time she had gotten involved with a powerful man, she had almost died. As a result, she had ended up here, and that had only made things worse. No, it was better if she didn't see him as a man at all.

She looked at him as he stood there thinking, staring at her again with that penetrating gaze. Who was this man? Certainly not a simple castle dweller. After all, he wrote letters and other texts in French.

She straightened her shoulders. "You probably need to start getting ready for dinner soon. So, what do you suggest?"

Amused, he looked at her. "No one will miss me down there. By now, everyone's probably too drunk to notice I'm not there."

"And what should we do now?"

That sentence had somehow come out all wrong, and she pressed her lips together when he raised his eyebrows. Although she never actually revised sentences she had already said, she explained, "It was not an immoral offer. What is your suggestion as to how we should proceed with the information?"

He stepped to the window and looked outside. "Answer me one more question first. Where are you from, and what are you doing here?"

"That's two questions."

Puzzled, he looked at her. "Okay then, answer me those two questions first."

She shrugged. "It doesn't really matter. I'll be gone soon anyway."

She had expected him to say something else, but he just nodded. He didn't seem surprised by that. Finally, he took a deep breath. "Before you leave, will you give me the information about Hamish if I promise to protect you until then?"

That was a deal she could agree to.

She had won her first ally. The wave of relief that washed over Allison nearly swept her off her feet. Still, she didn't want him to know how happy she was at his concession, so she asked, "Are you capable of protecting me?"

He laughed out loud. "I have negotiated with men in very high positions who have done much worse than you."

"Thank you for the compliment, if it was one, but can you protect me or not?"

He looked at her thoughtfully. "If you do everything I tell you, then yes."

For a very brief moment, very inappropriate images flashed through Allison's mind, and she was so horrified that she quickly turned away. Not that he could tell from her face that she had just been thinking about how she would do everything he said in bed. What made her think of that? But she did actually know because it

was so rare to meet a man who was her equal like this, and rarely were these men as handsome as this one. The raw presence of a Highlander that he exuded also contributed to her attraction. But she couldn't think of things like that right now. It would only complicate everything.

Finally, she nodded. "All right. You will protect me from Hamish until I..." she hesitated, "leave. And then I will give you the information."

He nodded. "Deal."

She held out her hand to him, and when he stared at it and didn't move, she realized that the gesture was probably not common here. She had to pay more attention.

She was about to withdraw her hand when he walked over to her and reached for it. Without taking his eyes off her for even a second, he squeezed her hand. His fingers were warm and strong. Then he twisted her fingers and gallantly raised her hand. For a tiny moment, his lips touched the skin on the back of her hand, and Allison shuddered. She felt like she'd been burned. Damn it, she had to get her body and thoughts under control.

"It's better this way," he said softly. "After all, you are a lady."

Allison raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"That I know," he said softly. He was still holding her hand but then let go, and Allison almost swayed a little.

"What do you suggest I do now?" she asked, trying to sound confident even though she wasn't right now.

He smiled. "First, it would be good for you to rest while I figure out how to help you."

She nodded. "Can I get past the hall without being seen?"

"Where are you going?"

"I thought you said I was supposed to rest."

"Do you have a place to sleep?"

Allison jutted her chin. "I'll find something."

"A bed?" Just as he spoke the words, he apparently realized what he had implied. Concerned, he looked at her. "By which I do not mean to imply that it is someone else's bed."

Was he actually blushing a little? Allison had already been the target of so many other snide remarks and indelicate insults that it seemed almost cute that his question made him uncomfortable.

She smiled. "I don't see why it's any of your business, but I was planning to sleep in the supply room by the gate."

She had thought that he would say nothing more about it, but he replied seriously. "That concerns me a great deal because I promised a few moments ago to protect you. I cannot do that if you sleep in a rat-infested room that cannot be locked from the inside and into which

one of the guards could come at any time. No, you sleep here. There's no way around the hall now anyway, which wouldn't be a negative if Hamish hadn't so publicly expelled you from the castle."

Allison stared at the bed. Once again, she had to forcefully suppress a few unbidden images creeping in. "Here? What about you?"

He pointed to the floor. "Also in this room, however, you need not be afraid of me. I will not harm you."

Too bad was Allison's first thought, and she hoped it hadn't shown on her face because his hazel eyes were watching her closely.

"And tomorrow?"

"We will figure out what to do." He smiled briefly. "However, I need more information from you about what exactly you're planning to do and where you want to go. Because otherwise, I can't help you get away from here."

Allison reached for the amulet again. She knew he wouldn't give her any more details because he guarded his information as well as she did. But she had to tell him a little bit.

"I'm looking for someone who also wears this amulet. Or an object that has this symbol carved on it."

His eyes had narrowed, and again his face hardened a bit. "An object?" he asked.

"A rock, for example."

He raised his eyebrows. "And where will you go when you have found all this?"

Allison studied his face, but it revealed no information. Her mind began to race. Would he have asked this question if he knew about time travel? Or was he just testing what she knew? He was so hard to figure out. In any case, she didn't want to tell him more. So, she just shrugged. "I'll decide about that then."

"Have you met anyone at the castle who wears this amulet?"

Allison shook her head.

"Anyone who recognizes it?"

She hesitated. "Only you. And the jester."

He raised his eyebrows. "What did she know?"

"Just what this amulet is."

When he leaned forward a little and eyed her with interest, she realized she had said too much. "What is it, then?" he inquired.

She shook her head. "If you knew, you wouldn't ask." She launched into a counterattack. "How do you know about it?"

Again, there was that hard expression on his face for a moment, then he smiled and turned away. "I think it's best if we go to sleep."

He cleared the papers from the chest and pulled out a plaid. Then he took one of the pillows from the bed and arranged his spot right by the door. Allison had no choice but to retire to bed as well. She

wouldn't learn anything else from him today. But she had a feeling he didn't associate positive things with the amulet. She wondered if he knew a woman who wore it.

Unable to change because she had no other clothes and unable to brush her teeth, she sat down on the edge of the bed and carefully took off her shoes. They were leather, but she wasn't wearing socks, and they were unfamiliar. She had developed a blister on one heel, plus her feet hurt.

She raised one foot over her knee to massage it a little. It felt so good. It still hurt from kicking Hamish. And she would have loved some foot cream and a band-aid.

She shifted her foot and closed her eyes for a moment. Although she was disappointed that she hadn't found the stone yet, and Cailean obviously didn't want to reveal what he knew, at least she felt safe around him. Now that dusk falling and the moon was taking over the evening sky, she was glad she wasn't sitting in the supply room wondering what had just walked across her feet. She wondered if rats nibbled on people, too. She shook herself at the thought and quickly opened her eyes.

Her eyes fell on Cailean, who was standing at the door with his arms crossed, staring at her. It took her a moment to realize that he was staring at her feet and lower legs because her skirt had ridden up above her knees.

Damn, another mistake. Caitrin had stressed that women didn't show much skin in those days. They could be barefoot in the fields or at work, but a bare lower leg or shoulder could be considered offensive. Or as seductive, Allison thought, noticing Cailean's expression.

Realizing that she had caught his gaze, he turned away, cleared his throat, and walked over to the window. Allison placed her feet on the carpet in front of the bed and looked down at them. She liked her legs and liked to wear skimpy shorts as well as dresses and skirts above the knee. But a man staring at her lower legs had never happened to her before.

She wondered what he was thinking right now. His gaze had been so full of desire that her cheeks grew hot.

She couldn't suppress a smile.

"You should close the curtains of the bed," he said, his voice sounding rough.

"If you'd rather," Allison couldn't help but say.

He cleared his throat again. "It's just for your safety," he said, and after a moment added, "In case someone comes into the room unexpectedly."

"Thank you for your foresight," Allison replied, biting her lip. He

was almost cute trying to regain his dignity. But she liked the way he was acting. She wasn't sure a man in her time would be so in control.

She untied the cords holding back the curtains on all four sides of the bed, and the thick drapes, made of velvet or something similar, fell into place with a rich sound.

Cailean stood at the window the whole time and looked outside. She waited a moment to see if he would turn around again, but he did not.

"Good night," she said, then added, "Thanks for everything."

"It's an honor," he replied, still not turning around.

Allison slipped through the curtains and lay down on the bed. It was quite dark and felt like a safe cocoon. Presumably, the curtains were more for winter, to keep people warm so the whole room wouldn't need to be heated. But now it was summer, and the heat was already building.

Allison didn't use the covers, just laid on top of them. It was much too warm, and she was wearing too much to sleep comfortably under the comforter.

She wondered whether people here slept naked in the summer? Or in their underclothes? Probably not in these woolen clothes, though. And what was it like in the winter? There was so much about this time that she just didn't know.

She heard Cailean make his camp and lie down as well.

The woolen fabric scratched her skin. Allison tried not to move, but she began to sweat, and the wetter her skin became, the more the woolen fabric itched. She had been scratching all day, wondering how people could stand to wear these clothes. She would probably never get used to it. But she didn't have to, because she was going to start her journey home as soon as possible. And then she would never wear a dress like this again.

She scratched her arm furtively, but that only made it worse. It was getting warmer and warmer behind the curtains. She carefully turned to the side and pushed the curtain open a little in the direction of the window so that the night air could flow in. But that did not alleviate the scratching.

Although she was completely exhausted, she knew that she would not be able to sleep if she kept wearing the wool dress. She had to take it off. But could she dare? Cailean wouldn't see her. That was what the curtains were for. And he was far too honorable to look behind them.

Her back itched, and she sat up to scratch there. The woolen fabric rubbed over her nipples, and she bit her lip. My goodness, that hurt.

There was no choice, she had to take off the dress. She fished for

the laces in the back and tried to loosen them, but apparently, she grabbed the wrong one because they pulled tighter. She started to panic since she couldn't get rid of the damn dress. She tried to pull it over her head, but it was too tight.

She attempted again to loosen the laces, but the dress was stubborn, and she couldn't even see what she was doing. Besides, she had never done anything like this before. Even with zippers, she sometimes had trouble, but this was just totally different.

She took a deep breath and tried again.

"Is everything okay?"

Cailean's voice snapped her out of her thoughts. In her struggle with the dress, she had completely forgotten that he was on the other side of the curtains.

She sighed, "No. I can't get the laces on the dress undone."

Silence.

"It's so hot I'm almost suffocating," she said.

Still silence.

"Oh, that's okay," she muttered, "I'll get them loose somehow."

After a few more minutes, he said, "Would you like me to help you?"

Allison bit her lip. It was certainly not at all decorous, but she was dying in this thing. It itched under her breast again, and she scratched there indignantly. Should she dare?

"That would be very kind," she said. "All you have to do is loosen the cords. I can manage everything else."

Silence again.

"Should I come out?"

"I think that would be good. I have more light at the window."

His voice sounded a little stressed.

She opened the curtains and crawled out of bed. He was already standing at the window, the moon bathing him in a silvery light. He was barefoot, and his shirt was open at the neckline, the sleeves rolled up. Fortunately, he was still wearing his pants.

He glanced over briefly, then he looked at the floor and pointed in front of him. Wordlessly, she stepped in front of him and turned her back. She resisted the urge to scratch, lowered her head, and lifted her long hair so that he could reach the laces better.

She could hear him taking deep breaths and even felt his breath on the back of her neck. Despite the warmth, goose bumps ran down her spine.

Then she felt his fingers through the fabric of her dress. It took a small moment before he began to untie the first laces. "There was a knot," he said softly. "You wouldn't have been able to undo that by yourself."

"Thank you," she said, hoping he didn't see the goosebumps still running down her back, starting from the points where he touched her bare skin.

Finally, the dress loosened, and Allison would have liked to immediately tear it off her body, but she controlled herself. He was still standing behind her, but she no longer felt his fingers.

"You're not wearing an undergarment," he said softly. "No wonder the wool itches."

"No," she said simply because she could hardly explain to him that it had been in the bag that had somehow not made it through the time travel.

She turned her head a little and was about to ask him if he was done when she felt something change between them. He wasn't touching her anymore, but he was standing right behind her, and she could feel his gaze and his breath on her skin.

Suddenly her breath quickened, and she closed her eyes to feel more. If she leaned back even a little, she would touch him, but she didn't, and he didn't lean forward either. They just stood there, like two statues.

Allison felt longing rise up inside her for him to kiss her on the neck, and again a shiver ran down her spine. But then she wondered where this would lead. Would he make love to her? Or was he too honorable for that? It would only complicate things, she knew that much.

She had to end this. So, she opened her eyes and said softly, "Thank you." That was how she hoped to sever the sensual bond between them. Then she let go of her hair and felt it run down her back.

He sucked in a sharp breath. "I'm not quite finished yet," he said.

Allison didn't know what she was expecting, but when he said, "There's another eyelet," she was almost a little disappointed. Carefully, he pushed her hair aside, touching her skin as if by accident. Now it was Allison's turn to inhale sharply. She knew for a fact that if he had defied his honor and kissed her, she would not have been averse.

He opened the eyelet at the top of the dress, which Allison remembered only dimly. Immediately she could breathe easier. Then he took her hair and pushed it back over her shoulder. It seemed as if he held it in his fingers for a moment longer. Agonizingly slowly, his hands stroked the fabric at her back, then he released her and took a step back. "I hope it's better now." His voice was hoarse.

"Much better," she said, holding her dress to her chest because it was already starting to slip over her shoulders.

He took a deep breath. "One more thing. I just realized."

She half-turned around. The sight of him in the moonlight almost took her breath away. She raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"I don't even know your name."

Allison frowned. It was true, they had never introduced themselves, yet they had become so close now. "Allison," she said.

He looked at her with interest. "And your family name?"

She hesitated. "Just Allison."

He put a hand on his chest, bowed slightly, and said, "Cailean MacGilvie."

Allison smiled. So, he wasn't a Maclean, then.

He looked at her piercingly for a moment more, then went back to his bed. "Good night, Lady Allison."

The way he said her name sounded nice. "Good night."

Allison slipped behind the curtains, quickly got rid of that awful dress, enjoyed for a short moment how the cool air brushed against her skin and slipped under the blanket. It was also much too warm for a night like this, but it felt soft and cool for a moment on her bare skin.

But as she lay in bed and stared at the ceiling, she couldn't rest. She certainly enjoyed life and had already been with several men, but this had just been one of the most sensual moments in her life. If not the most sensual. He had simply stood behind her and barely touched her.

She heard Cailean turn to the other side, and his irregular breathing revealed that he wasn't asleep either. Maybe she should have left the dress on, after all, then at least he could have slept. But then, she would not have experienced this wonderful moment. She smiled as she thought of how good his breath had felt on her skin.

She must have fallen asleep at some point because when she awoke, a crack in the curtain suggested that morning was already dawning. A noise had woken her up, and when she heard Cailean clear his throat, she knew what it had been. She stretched but remained under the covers.

"Lady Allison?"

She had to smile. "Yes?"

"I have some things to do. Please lock the room after I leave. No one will probably come here, but it's better if we don't risk anything. Wait for me here until I come back."

"How long will you be gone?"

"I'll be back by noon."

Her heart sank. She would have liked to be home by that time, but she complied and forced herself to stay calm. "All right, I'll wait."

He was silent for another moment, then she heard footsteps, unlocking the door, and then the door closing behind him.

Alison closed her eyes. So much longer to wait! And the worst was she could only sit around here and wait here. She wondered if maybe she should venture out on her own to search again. But she had promised to stay here. Besides, it was dangerous to walk around the castle. There were too many people around.

She sat up and looked around for her dress. It was lying next to her on the bed, and even as she looked at it, her skin began to itch.

If she was going to be alone here all morning anyway, maybe she could skip it. But she couldn't sit around here naked. Why hadn't she taken that summer dress with her? Maybe it could have passed for a slightly fancier undergarment. She wondered if she should go retrieve it.

But first, she needed to lock the door. Since she didn't want to walk around naked, she took the dress and held it in front of her. But it only covered her on one side. Maybe it would work.

She crawled out of bed, and immediately, the woolen fabric scratched her nipples again. Allison gritted her teeth and got up. The sun was already flooding the room.

One of the plaids Cailean had used for sleeping lay on the chest. It was also made of woolen fabric and would certainly scratch as much as her dress, but at least she could drape it around her like a cape. Maybe that would be better.

She picked it up, and immediately Cailean's scent, which she had noticed last night as he stood so close behind her, wafted into her nose. For some reason, his scent made her feel safe. Maybe because Cailean was sort of like her bodyguard here, and she felt very safe with him.

She put the plaid around her shoulders. It reached down to the floor but gaped open in front because she had to stretch her arms out. So she wrapped it around her chest like a bath towel and tucked it in. It was too long, but at least everything but her shoulders was demurely covered. And surprisingly, the fabric was softer than her dress. Much softer. It didn't chafe at all.

She gathered the excess fabric with her hand and went to the door. She was about to reach out for the latch when the door slowly opened.

Allison backed up. Cailean stood there with a tray in his hand. His eyes were wide with surprise, and he was standing very still.

She heard a voice behind him in the hallway, and Cailean hastily pushed his way into the room, closing the door and leaning against it. All while still staring at her.

Allison spoke first. "I was just about to lock the door."

"And I wanted to bring you something to eat."

His eyes wandered over the plaid and her bare shoulders. He seemed very uncomfortable, and his cheeks started turning red.

"Why didn't you knock? Then I would have known you were coming in."

And she certainly wouldn't have been standing in the middle of the room in that getup. She sincerely hoped he didn't think she wanted to seduce him.

He finally tore his gaze away and looked her in the eyes. "I thought that knocking on my own door would give a strange impression." He again looked down at her. "Why are you wearing my plaid?"

Allison bit her lower lip. "I needed something to cover myself, and the dress is still so scratchy. Your plaid was there and..." She broke off. "Do you want me to take it off?"

"No," he said quickly. "I'm leaving again."

He went to hand her the tray, but when she reached out and held the plaid to her chest so it wouldn't slip off, he quickly set it on the floor. "Lock the door behind me," he said. Then he was gone.

Allison rushed to the door and pushed the latch into place. She leaned her head against the wood and closed her eyes. Bodyguard or not, she hadn't been prepared for that. Especially not for that look. She might just as well have stood naked in front of him. It probably would have had the same effect on him.

Suddenly she heard a voice on the other side. His voice.

"Sweet Virgin Mary, help me."

It was just a murmur, but she could still hear him. He sounded genuinely upset, and Allison had to smile. She couldn't remember ever having had such an effect on a man before. And to think, he had only seen her bare lower legs and shoulders. Of course, she was flattered.

A laugh rang out in the hallway. "About what?"

Allison shuddered. If she wasn't mistaken, that was Hamish's voice. She took a step back and was suddenly very aware of her nakedness under the plaid.

She could not hear Cailean's answer. Hamish said something else, then laughed again, and the footsteps moved away.

Allison was frustrated. She had to get away from here as soon as possible.

Around noon, Allison felt she couldn't wait any longer. She had decided to wear her dress again after all. It was simply safer. She had spent the morning on the bed, only opening the window curtains so she wouldn't suffocate. Breakfast had been delicious, but her stomach was starting to growl again. She couldn't just stroll out of the room to find something to eat. And she had better pace herself better the next time Cailean brought her that watery ale.

Time seemed to have stopped. She had to do something. And hadn't Cailean said he would return around noon? Now it was past noon, and he still wasn't back. She walked around the room restlessly, trying not to make too much noise in case someone was in the room below her. The view from the window didn't offer any variety either. Apart from the forest, there was not much to see outside, and she didn't dare stick her head too far out of the window.

At last, she heard a timid knock at the door. "It's me," said a soft voice.

She pushed the latch aside and let Cailean enter, anxious not to be seen from the hallway and relieved that he was finally back. He carried a tray of food again and set it down on the chest. Then he reached under his plaid, which he had belted over his shoulder, and handed her a bundle, though without looking at her.

"What's this?" asked Allison, taking the bundle, so their fingers weren't touching.

He turned to the food. "A lighter woolen dress. It will make you look like a maid. And an undergarment."

Had his ears turned red?

"Thank you," she said softly, wondering where he found them.

"I have—" he continued, but someone rattled the door handle from outside trying to open the door.

Allison gasped. Fortunately, she had slid the latch shut again. Cailean was also staring at the door. Someone was now throwing their shoulder against it.

"Cailean?"

"Damn," he muttered. "Hamish."

Allison's stomach clenched.

"What is it?" exclaimed Cailean.

"Open up," Hamish demanded. "Why did you lock your door?"

"I'll be right there," Cailean growled, barely audibly. He rushed over to her, lowered his head, and whispered in her ear, "Under the bed. Quietly."

For a brief moment, Allison froze, but when Hamish tried to open the door again, she dropped to all fours and crawled under the bed. Cailean slipped the clothes he had just given her and her shoes underneath as well. Then he opened the door.

"What is it?"

Allison could see a pair of mighty boots pushing their way into the room. "At last," Hamish growled. "What was that about?"

"I've just been working on something, and I needed the quiet."

"Really? And for that, you have to lock the door?"

"Yes, because otherwise, someone is always trying to come in. Like you are right now."

"And since when do you eat in your room?"

Cailean sighed, "Since I need peace and quiet to work."

It was silent for a moment. Allison tried to lie very still and not make a sound. She didn't want to think about what would happen if Hamish discovered her here.

He suddenly laughed. "Oh, now I understand. You have a visitor."

Allison froze. Cailean, too, seemed to take a moment to catch himself. "What makes you think that?"

"Come on. The curtains... Who takes them down in the summer? Who are you hiding behind them?"

"There's no one in the bed."

"Who is she? Do I know her?"

"Like I said, there's no one in the bed."

Allison heard the curtain jerk aside. Disappointed, Hamish said, "You're right."

"I work and don't have time for that. Not everyone has women in their room. You shouldn't infer from yourself to others."

Hamish laughed, and Allison thought she could hear that it wasn't a real laugh. "Did I tell you that I caught little Jenny in my room the other night?"

"I'm not interested in your women stories, Hamish. And certainly, you didn't come here for that. So, what's this all about? Shall we go downstairs?"

"Nay, it is better if we are undisturbed."

Allison gritted her teeth. Really?

Cailean sighed. "Now tell me already. I have work to do."

"It's about Malcolm, that scoundrel. I've heard that a couple of his men, and maybe even including him, have been spotted in our territory. Presumably, they've been spying on the cattle herds in Glen Bheinn. We'll have to reinforce the guards there if we don't want them to take them off our hands."

"That's nothing new," Cailean said, "Why are you coming to me with this?"

"Because I wanted to ask you who we should send."

"Me?"

"Do you mind? You always seem to know everything better. And Father said I should check with you. After all, Malcolm's territory borders yours. You know him better."

"So you want to send men from Glen Duisk?"

"If you suggest it?"

Cailean was silent for a moment. "Yes, that would be a good idea. However, we can't pull too many, or they'll have trouble with the harvest."

"Tell me how many we need, and I will send for them."

"Can't we get men from one of the other glens? Why does it have to be only MacGilvies?"

Allison perked up. That was Cailean's last name, after all. Although she could hear everything the men were saying, she didn't understand what it was really about. Tension was in the air, and obviously, both disliked the conversation.

"I'll see what I can do," Hamish said. "But you know, even the others can't stay away from the harvest for long."

"I'll talk to your father about it again tonight," Cailean replied.

"No, that's all right. I think we can work this out among ourselves."

"Was there anything else?"

Hamish took a step toward Cailean, and the next moment Allison heard a clapping sound. Apparently, Hamish was patting Cailean on the shoulder. "Father has scheduled the next hunt in a few days. He's anxious to hunt down that boar. Are you going to be there again? Or did you get too fine for that sort of thing in Paris? John told me you traded your plaid for pants because they got too bloody."

He boomed with laughter.

Cailean sighed, "Of course I'm in."

Hamish turned toward the door, and Allison was about to breathe a sigh of relief when he turned back once more. "One more thing. Where's your sister?"

Cailean hesitated a split second too long. "What do you mean?"

He asked a counter-question, Allison noticed. She listened intently.

"I tried to send for her this morning, but she wasn't there. Not at the grave either. So where is she?"

"Probably gathering herbs."

"She's been gone a few days."

"You know, of course, that it can take a long time sometimes, especially when she's out in the Highlands."

Hamish snorted. "See that you find her again. I want to speak with her. And soon."

"Speak?" asked Cailean, mockingly but also annoyed.

"Yes, talk. About the wedding."

Again there was a long silence. "Did your father agree after all?" Cailean did not sound pleased.

"I don't care what he says. Soon I'll be the Laird here, and I'll decide who I marry. And that's Rhona."

Now it was Cailean who shifted his stance more wide-legged as if getting ready to fight. "Have you perhaps forgotten that I also have something to say about this?"

Hamish laughed. "You're not seriously objecting, are you? How good do you think it will be for your people if I, as their new Laird, marry the elder one's daughter. I will certainly take care of them, Rhona will see to that. And that's what you should want if you can't be their Laird."

The tension between the two men was palpable.

"You don't know what I want," Cailean said so heatedly that Allison raised her eyebrows in surprise. This seemed to be his sore spot, and Hamish had hit it. Even though she didn't know what exactly all this was about, she knew Cailean and Hamish were playing a power game with each other. And Hamish was in the better position. No wonder Cailean was gathering information about him.

Well, she would give it to him.

Hamish laughed. "Of course, I know what you want. You can't wait until Father finally dies because you hope to persuade me to return your valley and your people." He laughed mockingly. "Who knows, if I can get your sister in exchange, I might get carried away. But she would have to be here first for that because I need to talk to her."

Allison was amazed at the arrogance in Hamish's words. And why did he want to marry Cailean's sister so badly? He wasn't even into women.

Cailean seemed to see it differently. "Do you really think I'm going to give you my sister as a wife if you keep bragging about your womanizing ways?"

Anger resonated in his voice.

"I've always gotten everything I've wanted so far," Hamish said, turning away. "Send Rhona to me as soon as she gets back. Fortunately, she's someone who can decide for herself. I hardly think she'll pass up the chance to be the Laird's wife."

Before Cailean could answer, he closed the door.

Allison didn't even dare to breathe. She wondered if Cailean was aware that she had overheard everything. Perhaps he had forgotten her presence, as she had forgotten his last night when she was struggling with the dress. Feelings had that effect sometimes. Allison had taken advantage of that many times as a journalist when she wanted to elicit information from someone. While distracted with deep-seated emotions, some people revealed quite a bit.

But then she heard him slide the latch forward and take a deep breath. "You can come out now."

Allison crawled out from under the bed, and he offered his hand to help her to her feet. And, after a moment's hesitation, she grabbed it. When she stood up, he immediately let go of her.

"I'm sorry you had to listen to that. I shouldn't have gotten carried away."

Allison looked at him, perplexed. She realized that the information she had about Hamish was even more explosive than she had thought. Especially if Hamish wanted to marry Cailean's sister and the latter wanted to prevent it. If Cailean was already getting so angry over the alleged womanizing, he would certainly not agree to the marriage when he learned that Hamish preferred to sleep with men. But should she press her advantage already? Fortunately, this Rhona was apparently not around right now, so she still had a little time to think about it. And as soon as she found the stone, she would give Cailean the information anyway. That was the deal.

"You were very quick-witted," she said as the silence stretched on and on.

Cailean waved it off. "Hamish is relatively easy to hoodwink if you get it right. That's one advantage of having known each other all our lives."

Allison frowned. "He's not your brother, though, is he? Are you friends?"

Cailean wiped his face. "I'm not sure you can call it friendship. We grew up together, learning each other's weaknesses and shamelessly exploiting them most of the time. We're more like brothers or cousins. And I actually like him too, but for some time now, it's been..." he searched for the right word, "complicated."

Allison bit her lip. Did he really know Hamish's every weakness? Maybe the other was a better actor than Cailean thought.

"It's best to forget what you heard. We've had this conversation many times before."

"But still, he's driving you up the wall," Allison remarked.

"Yes, he manages to do that all the time. But I also know his sore spot, and that helps."

"And that would be?"

Cailean smiled. "As we noted yesterday, information is precious, and it should not be given away so lightly."

Allison lowered her head. She hated it when others noticed how curious she was. It was a trait she had always been reprimanded for. But it actually helped quite a bit in her job. Feigning humility, she said, "You're right about that."

Cailean looked at her, almost amused. "In his case, though, it's easy. His sore spot is my sister. Even if it doesn't seem like it, he does really love her."

Allison had to bite her lip to keep from saying anything. He noticed and frowned. Damn, he was way too observant. She crossed her arms, and before he could say anything, she asked, "Were you able to find out anything more about the amulet?"

A change of subject might not be a bad thing.

He shook his head. "I was busy getting the dress and doing my job."

"What's your job?" Allison blurted out, immediately biting her lip again. Clearly too curious, especially for a woman.

He frowned. "I do the paperwork for the Laird. He has too much to do, and he doesn't like the accounts. Neither does Hamish. That's why I have to take care of it."

"Do you like the work?" asked Allison.

He shrugged. "It has to be done."

She would have liked to ask more questions, especially about the conversation between him and Hamish, because she hadn't quite understood what it was about. And apparently, there was conflict smoldering there. And why had they grown up together but were not related and didn't share the same last name? Why would Hamish become the Laird of Cailean's people? And what exactly did his sister have to do with it? All these questions were burning on her tongue. She didn't want to get on his nerves, though, because she was too dependent on him right now, so she swallowed the questions, even though it was hard for her. Instead, she turned back to her own concern. "What can I do to find out more about the amulet?" she asked.

He raised his shoulders. "Nothing, I'm afraid, because you can't leave the room."

"But I'm not the type to sit around a room and wait. Maybe it would be better if I wasn't here all day. What could have happened if Hamish had decided to come when we weren't yet back? What could I have done then?"

Cailean grinned. "Just don't open the door. And then I would have simply told him I was hiding a woman in my room." He crossed his

arms as well and regarded her with interest. "If you're not the type to sit around in a room, may I ask what you like to do better?"

Allison thought about her job and how freely she could move around in her world, how she hunted down stories, took risks for them, and then turned them into texts that she sold. But she could hardly explain that to him. "I'd rather be on the road," she simply said instead.

Her eyes fell to the dress in her hand, and suddenly she had an idea. "If I already look like a maid in this dress, why don't I work as one? That way, I wouldn't have to wait in your room until you have time to take care of the amulet at some point. Then I could find things out for myself."

The corner of his mouth twitched with suppressed amusement.

She looked at him darkly. "Don't you trust me to work as a maid?"

"Lady Allison, although I hardly know you, I have a lot of confidence in you. I just find your suggestions very interesting."

She wondered if that was another term for crazy, but in the end, she didn't care. She tried it another way. "I'm sure you'll be glad to be rid of me, too. And the sooner I find someone who knows about the amulet, the sooner I'll leave. And then you can devote yourself to your work and those interesting arguments with your sort of brother slash friend. Or find your sister."

She had said too much. At first, he had smiled, but as soon as she had mentioned his sister, his expression had turned sinister, and he looked away. So, his sister seemed not only to be Hamish's sore spot but also his. Jesus, this really wasn't easy.

He stood at the window and looked out. Finally, he shook his head. "No, you stay here."

Allison raised her eyebrows. "But—" she continued.

Cailean interrupted her. "Do you remember that you promised to do everything I say? It's too dangerous for you to be out in the castle. If Hamish catches you, I don't know what will happen."

"But he's not around in the kitchen or utility rooms, is he?"

"Yes, he might be."

"But he won't suspect me there, and if I wear a different dress, bow my head, and don't speak, he probably won't even recognize me."

"Hamish never forgets a woman's face."

Allison wanted to reply but bit her tongue. Hamish would most certainly forget the face of any woman, but certainly not the one who knew his secret. She was far too dangerous to him for that. Perhaps Cailean was right. Still, she said, "I can't stand sitting around here anymore, though. I have to do something."

He raised his eyebrows. "You've only been in this room for half a day. You will have to endure it for a little while. But don't worry, I'll

do my best."

With an exasperated sigh, Allison turned away. "I would like to put on the dress now and would prefer it if you left me alone."

She heard for herself how defiant she sounded.

He sounded almost relieved and said, "I'll be back tonight. Lock the door behind me. And don't let anyone in."

She would have loved to stick her tongue out at him. Just like the wolf and the seven little goats, Allison thought, not even turning around when he left the room. At least something was happening in the fairy tale, and the little goats weren't just sitting around waiting. It was going to be the longest afternoon of her life, of that, she was sure.

That evening, Allison didn't speak much and retreated behind

the curtains as soon as Cailean entered the room. She was still angry, even though she knew he was right. But she couldn't admit that.

As soon as she heard that he, too, was lying down to sleep, she took off her dress. The new one was much easier to deal with than the one she had chosen to travel. Presumably, it was the type of dress you only wore if you had a servant to help. Or a man who was happy to untie the laces. But Allison had to continually push away, thinking of the previous night and his fingers on her back. She was angry with him, after all, for keeping her here.

The next morning, he again gave notice that he was leaving, and this time she immediately locked the door. Out of defiance, she stood by the door in her undergarment, even though the almost translucent fabric revealed more than any bikini in modern time. Let him see her like this, it would serve him right. But this time, he did not come back.

The day passed uneventfully, and in the evening, as Allison was about to go to bed, Cailean told her that he still hadn't figured anything out but was working on it. She just shrugged, even though she really wanted to tell him to try harder.

The next day, she felt like she had made grooves in the floor, she had paced back and forth so much. By now, she could understand how caged animals must feel. Yet, she wasn't even locked in but always latched the door herself.

The next night she decided it was time to make a change. She had to get out of there and had to find the stone. Maybe it was in the exact same place it was in her time, or at least somewhere in the village. She was determined to find it. Or at least someone who knew about the stone because there had to be a gatekeeper.

Suddenly she was annoyed that she had not paid better attention when Caitrin had tried to get her to memorize the list of gatekeepers in the different eras. Who had it been in 1589? Had there been a name on the list? And if so, who? But nothing stirred in her memory, plus,

she had to admit, she had only pretended to read the list carefully.

She felt ashamed now for not listening better to Caitrin. But she would find the stone because she was good at finding things and people.

Listening to Cailean's steady breathing, she decided that the following evening, when he was asleep, she would leave the room and then the castle. It was almost a full moon, and she could spend the whole night outside searching for the stone.

She spent the next day making plans. She would take only the maid's dress and leave the other one here, and she wouldn't spend much time searching the castle again. She had already done that, for one thing, and for another, it was simply too dangerous. The first thing she planned to do was go to the spot where the stone was in her time. That would at least be a start. And, she decided to wear her amulet openly so that others who knew would be able to notice it.

She also napped a little in the afternoon to gather energy for her search the next night.

Towards evening, Cailean came into the room. He looked heated and full of energy. It was as if a wave of masculinity had spilled into the room, and Allison pressed her lips together. Suddenly she resented the fact that he could walk around outside, and she couldn't.

"I won't be able to eat here tonight," he said. "And I won't be able to bring you anything to eat until later, either."

Allison frowned. "Why?"

"We've been hunting, and there's a big feast. If I don't show up, Hamish will be even more suspicious than he already is. Later, when everyone is drunk, and that will be quick since the hunt was successful, I'll be able to smuggle some food for you."

"You were hunting?" asked Allison, clenching her hands in disappointment. If only she had known! It would have been the perfect time to leave the castle this afternoon because none of the men would have been around.

"Yes, and before you ask, I haven't discovered anything else yet."

Allison averted her eyes. Sometimes she felt as if he almost didn't want to find anything out but was having his fun making her sit up here.

"I'm going to leave now," he said irresolutely.

"Have fun," she replied flippantly.

He took a deep breath. "Allison..." he began but did not speak further. She forced herself to look away so as not to encourage him to keep talking. "I'll be back soon," was all he said.

Allison didn't answer or look at him again. Only when he had closed the door behind him did she realize that, if all went well, she might not see him again. And although she was eager to get home,

something about that thought bothered her.

She bit her lip. It was a bit unfair to leave just like that. After all, he had helped her without even knowing who she was. She couldn't imagine why he had done that; most men certainly wouldn't have put themselves in danger like that for a woman they didn't know.

Besides, he had asked very few questions. He had not wanted to know where she came from or where exactly she was going. Even when she had refused to tell him her last name, he hadn't inquired further. And he had provided her with food and clothes and offered her a safe place to sleep.

Without him, she would certainly feel much worse, and she realized how ungrateful she was being. Actually, decency alone dictated that she should say goodbye to him, but she couldn't tell him about her plans to leave the castle because she knew he would try to hold her back.

However, she still owed him something, namely the information about Hamish, and she wanted to keep her promise in any case. But how could she give him the information when they probably wouldn't see each other again?

She chewed on her lower lip and looked around. Her eyes fell on the parchment. He had taken all the papers with writing, but a few of the blank sheets remained. Allison assumed they were precious, and she shouldn't use them the way she used paper in her time, but how else was she going to break the news to him? Knowing how valuable this information was to him, she decided it would be okay.

She rose, pushed the latch forward, and listened once more in the hallway. Downstairs, she could hear loud voices and laughter from the hall. There was clearly drinking going on. She would soon be able to sneak away. No one would notice if she left the castle now.

Allison took a piece of parchment, squatted on the floor, dipped her quill in the ink, and began to write. At first, she thought she'd write in English but then decided to patch together her French from school, which she had previously only had to use occasionally on vacation or for the odd bit of research. That language seemed safer if someone else found the parchment. She was sure that few people here spoke French, and she knew Hamish certainly didn't since he had made fun of Cailean's stay in France.

It took a long time, and writing with the pen was unusual. She constantly ran out of ink, lacked the correct words, or had to think about how she should put the words together. Even in English, it would have been difficult for her to explain that Hamish loved men. Plus, she wanted to write it in a way that Cailean would definitely understand. In French, it seemed almost impossible.

It took an eternity, her fingers were black from ink, and she had

spilled several ink blots on the paper, the floor, and even on her dress, but she finally finished. She was not proud of her text, but it served its purpose.

She considered mixing the parchment upside down among the others, but she was afraid that someone else might find it. The information was way too explosive for that. But where else could she place it? Under the pillow? But what if a maid changed the beds? Under the bed? He probably wouldn't look there, especially since he wasn't expecting a letter.

Then she thought of the perfect place. She opened the chest and slipped the parchment between the folds of his neatly folded plaid. He had brought it with him, washed only yesterday, and stowed it in the chest.

Allison stroked the woolen cloth again, which had a very different pattern than Hamish's. It was more red and less blue. As she closed the chest, she couldn't help but think of how much it had upset Cailean when she had worn the plaid like a bath towel and couldn't suppress a smile. He probably wouldn't forget the strange woman who had stayed in his room for a few days so quickly.

She put her dress under the bed, closed all the curtains, and went to the door. Her heart pounding, Allison opened it and listened. The hall was still noisy, and apparently, the men were actually drunk now. It might not be long at all before Cailean came upstairs. She had to act quickly.

Allison gathered her courage and stepped into the hallway. She closed the door behind her and crept down the stairs. There was no one here. Everyone seemed to be in the Great Hall.

The sounds of revelers grew louder and louder, and finally, Allison reached the hallway separating the stairwell from the hall. She couldn't see anyone around here, but the doors to the hall were open. She knew she should just keep walking, but she couldn't contain her curiosity. If she looked out of the dark hallway into the brightly lit hall, no one would see her, would they? When would she ever have the opportunity to see something like that again? Even though she wanted to get away from this time as soon as she could, she found it fascinating and would have liked to do more research.

Carefully, she walked along the wall and peeked around the corner. What she saw took her breath away. Men in kilts, several even carrying swords, were sitting at the tables, with women scattered between them. Maids were busy serving food, and some people were already eating.

The men looked fierce and brave, most of them as muscular as bodybuilders from her own time. Only a few were lankier. And all of them were drunk.

She looked around for Cailean, making sure he didn't notice her. She knew he had a sense when someone was looking at him. Some people had that, and he was definitely one of them. If he noticed her here, she decided she'd run and hide somewhere. But she would not be returning to that room again.

She spotted him at a large table standing on the dais. Hamish was also there, taking a sip from a goblet and laughing boisterously at something the man next to him had said. Cailean, on the other hand, was serious and watching everyone. He seemed uneasy, and she hoped it wasn't because he could feel her gaze on him.

Next to Hamish sat a man who bore a strong resemblance to him but was considerably older. Probably his father, the Laird. He seemed to be a powerful man, at least that's what she inferred from the way he acted and how reverent the servants were in his presence. He looked pale, almost a little sickly, and Allison remembered Hamish accusing Cailean of just waiting for his father to die. She wondered if he was sick.

Allison decided she had seen enough. She was about to turn away when her eyes caught on the Laird. He had been laughing at something the woman next to him had said, but then he suddenly made a surprised face and grabbed his neck. He coughed, and his face turned red. Hamish, who was sitting next to him, turned around and slapped him on the back with the flat of his hand. Then asked him something. The Laird nodded, and Hamish turned back to the man on his other side. But the Laird's complexion grew darker while he was coughing. Then he rose and walked quickly off the dais.

Allison stared at him. Clearly, he had choked on something while laughing. And it was now stuck in his throat. She remembered a scene she had witnessed a few months ago at a very fine restaurant she had visited with Daniel. A woman had also been choking and, because she didn't want to disturb the other guests with her coughing, had retreated to an adjoining room. There she had collapsed and had been found a few minutes later, already dead. After the emergency doctor arrived, who couldn't do anything except determine the cause of death, he had explained to everyone that most people died from choking because they retreated and no one could help them. But if you could help, you should never slap them on the back because that could cause them to inhale the piece even deeper; you should use the Heimlich maneuver. Shocked by what had happened, Allison had researched the Heimlich maneuver on the internet directly at the table and had lectured Daniel, who was rather bored by it all, on how it worked.

As the Laird staggered toward the corridor, she realized that she had to use the Heimlich maneuver right now. Because apparently, no

one had noticed that the Laird was choking.

She glanced over at Cailean, but he had turned to his conversation partner. Should she draw his attention? But how? He was sitting on the other side of the hall.

Allison noticed a girl of about fourteen, who was also sitting at the table, looking behind the Laird and drawing the attention of the woman at his side. She was about to rise when the woman held her back and shook her head sternly. Concerned, the girl kept watching the Laird.

Damn, Allison thought, the kid had had the right idea.

The Laird reached the doorway, and as soon as he entered the darker part of the corridor not far from Allison, he propped himself against the wall. He tried to cough, but he couldn't get any air into his lungs. Now he was also getting weaker.

Allison knew she had to act quickly; after all, she couldn't just let him die. She ran to him and grabbed his arm. "You're choking," she explained.

He looked up at her, and his eyes were washed out.

"You're choking," Allison said again, grabbing her own neck.

He nodded.

"I will help you," Allison declared. She had read that in the article, too. You should always warn patients that you're going to do something, so they don't fight back and make things worse.

She walked behind him and wrapped her arms around the big man. To her horror, she noticed they were almost too short because he had such a massive upper body. She put her fist on the place where she thought his diaphragm was, then one hand flat over it. He tried to resist but swayed and gave up resisting. Allison had to catch him and reposition herself. He was heavy in her arms, and she suspected he would pass out soon if she didn't do something quickly.

She tried to pull her hands into his belly with a jerk but didn't achieve much because her arms weren't long enough. She tried again, and again it didn't work.

She needed someone with longer arms. The Laird swayed more now and slumped down.

"Help," she screamed. Then louder again. "Help!"

The Laird slipped out of her arms and sank to the ground. He almost dragged her with him, but she was just able to jump to the side so that his massive body didn't land on top of her. Desperately, she tried to remember if the Heimlich maneuver could still be used on people who were unconscious.

His face was pale, almost bluish, and his eyes were wide. Allison knelt down beside him. No breath. Of course, there wasn't. The article she had read said to then do CPR. But not mouth-to-mouth, or you'd

just keep blowing the food into their lungs...

She tried to remember exactly how the heart massage worked. She placed her hands on his broad chest. Sure enough, she could not feel a heartbeat. So he wasn't just unconscious, he was effectively dead.

She put her hands together and pressed down on his chest. She realized, though, that that was too weak, so she stiffened her arms and leaned all of her weight on them. She had learned in a first aid course that you should do it in a certain type of quick rhythm. So, she began to push, humming "Stayin' alive" by the Bee Gees, just as she had learned in the class back then. At the time, however, they had played the song in the background. "Highway to hell" was probably also okay in terms of rhythm, but she found that somehow inappropriate.

Suddenly his ribs cracked under her hands, and she stopped moving, startled, but then remembered that this could happen. So she continued.

Allison heard voices beside her, but she didn't have time to look up. She had to save him. Her arms began to ache, but she knew she couldn't stop. It was necessary to keep going until the paramedics arrived.

The paramedics... something about that made her wonder. Someone had to call the paramedics. But suddenly, it struck her that there were no paramedics. No one would come. No ambulance, no paramedic.

At that moment, someone grabbed her and pulled her away from the Laird. She realized that CPR was useless during this time because there was no hospital, no defibrillator, and no intensive care unit. It had all been for nothing, and only the Heimlich maneuver could have saved him. She almost cried out in disappointment.

Someone pulled her to her feet and pushed her against the wall. For a moment, she continued to stare at the Laird, who now lay dead on the floor, but then she lifted her eyes, dazed, and looked into horrified faces. One of them was Cailean, who kept looking back and forth from the Laird to her.

"What have you done, girl?" someone shouted, and Allison tore her gaze away from Cailean. It was Hamish, standing next to his dead father, looking at her.

"I..." she began but broke off.

"What happened to him?" a woman's voice called out, and a figure knelt down beside the Laird. It was the lady who had restrained the girl at the table from following the Laird. Probably his wife, Allison thought dully.

Another man fell to his knees beside the Laird. He put a hand on his chest and then raised his eyebrows in amazement. "He's dead," he said slowly. "But how..."

Hamish stared at the man. "Dead?"

The other nodded.

A collective horrified sigh went through those gathered, then the message, "The Laird is dead," was carried further into the Great Hall, resulting in more shouts and commotion.

The woman shrieked in agony and threw herself over the dead man.

Hamish's gaze shifted back to Allison. He was cold. "You killed him."

The pressure on her neck increased as the man holding her pressed her tighter against the wall. Allison stared at Hamish. "No," she choked out, now she could hardly breathe either. "I was trying to save him."

"Liar," Hamish shouted, taking a step closer. "You knelt on him and killed him with your hands."

Desperately, Allison shook her head, which was almost impossible. The woman was still screaming, and everyone was staring at her, stunned. "He was choking. He couldn't get any air."

"Shut up, you witch."

Someone sucked in a horrified breath. Allison tried to break free, but the man held her so tightly that she couldn't move. She felt panic rising inside her. How was she going to explain that she hadn't done anything?

Her eyes wandered to Cailean, but he only looked at her

questioningly. Horror was in his eyes. He did not believe her. How could he? She realized that he wouldn't stand up for her, nor could he, because he could not be sure if she was telling the truth. All the evidence was against her.

"Why did you do that?" roared Hamish.

"Listen to me," Allison said, her voice just a whisper, "He was choking. I was trying to help him. I didn't kill him."

"Silence. We saw you do it. There's bound to be a dagger somewhere."

"There is no dagger," Allison yelled, trying again to break free. "He choked to death. On his food."

Hamish leaned his face very close to hers and yelled, "Shut up, I said." He turned to the others. "Find the dagger." When no one moved, he yelled, "Now!"

"Hamish?" said the man who had examined the Laird.

"What?" he snapped at him.

"The Laird has no wound."

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't have a wound. He wasn't stabbed. There's no blood here."

"That can't be. Then how could he have died?"

The man hesitated and looked at Allison. "Maybe she's telling the truth." However, he immediately ducked away.

"That can't be," Hamish objected again.

"Yes, it's true," said a small voice now. "Father was coughing and all red when he got up. You were patting him on the back yourself."

The girl stood in the doorway to the Great Hall and looked at Hamish almost defiantly.

"Shut up," he said.

The girl lifted her chin a little. "But it's true."

"Shut up already, Ila. You wouldn't know anything about that."

The girl pressed her lips together and gave Hamish a scowl, then walked over to Cailean and pulled him by the sleeve. "You tell him."

Cailean looked briefly at Allison. He hesitated but then nodded. "I also saw you pat him on the back for coughing. He had been choking. It sounds plausible."

Hamish looked like he was about to burst with anger. "I don't want to hear any more. My father is dead, the Laird is dead, and that woman killed him."

Several women began to cry and wail. Allison suddenly felt very cold. She wasn't sure she would get out of here alive.

Cailean walked over to Hamish. "We should discuss this somewhere else."

Hamish glanced at Allison, and suddenly something inside him

changed. He stared at her, and his eyes widened. "It's her," he hissed.

Allison realized that he had only just now recognized her. And suddenly, she felt sick.

Cailean put a hand on his arm. "Come with me, we'll go to your study and talk there in peace."

Hamish shook off his hand. "Take her there. I want to talk to her. But tie her up by her hands and feet. She must not escape. She killed the Laird and planned it from long ago."

"No," Allison screamed and tried to fight back, but strong hands pulled her aside. She shot a desperate look toward Cailean, who stared helplessly at her. Then several hands began to tie her up.

"I'll come with you," Cailean said to Hamish as he turned away.

"No, I'll handle it myself," the latter growled.

"You won't. You're beside yourself, and I don't want you to do anything you'll regret later." He looked at Hamish piercingly. "You know what I mean."

Hamish hesitated for a moment. "All right, you come along and Angus too."

The girl stepped forward. "I want to come too."

Hamish stared at her, then gave a barking laugh. "Out of the question."

"I don't want you to hurt her, though. She hasn't done anything to Father, I know that."

"You don't know anything, you're a child," Hamish yelled at her.

Cailean turned to the girl. "I'll make sure," he said softly. "I promise."

One of the men tightened the rope around Allison's wrists, then pushed her forward. Everyone looked hostile and gazed at her suspiciously. For a very brief moment, Allison was glad there were two guards flanking her and relentlessly pulling her along.

A short time later, she was in a room with a desk and some chairs. A fire had been lit and was just beginning to burn. Hamish was already waiting for her, next to him stood Cailean and Angus, the man who had taken her to the courtyard to meet the jesters a few days before. Hamish was glowering at them, Angus looked rather embarrassed, and Cailean's expression was unreadable. Allison held onto him with her gaze. Everything else scared her, and she knew he was sympathetic. At least, she hoped he was.

Hamish pointed to the chair that stood in the middle of the room. "Tie her there."

Allison gasped as one of her guards pushed her into the chair.

"Is that really necessary?" asked Cailean.

Hamish gave him a somber look. "You've seen how she fights."

"I hardly think she'll try that again."

"She won't be fighting at all, soon, if I have my way," Hamish said.

"Get a hold of yourself," Cailean demanded quietly. "You are now the Laird of the Maclean clan. This is beneath you."

Hamish became quite calm, and a small smile spread across his face, but it was a cold smile. "That's right, I am the Laird of the Maclean clan, and I can do whatever I want. Especially with the woman who killed my father. She'll pay for it."

"I don't think she killed him."

"Be still, Cailean, I command you as your Laird."

Cailean looked at him calmly. "I have not yet sworn allegiance to you. You have no power to command me."

For a moment, the two men stared each other down. Finally, Hamish gritted his teeth until the muscles in his jaw twitched and then turned to Allison. He regarded her intently. "So, it is indeed her." He shook his head. "Didn't I tell you to get out of here with your jester friends?"

Allison pressed her lips together. She knew she had nothing to gain by responding.

"Maybe she wasn't one of them," Angus suggested.

Hamish wheeled around to face him. "What makes you think that?"

"She argued with them and didn't help when they packed up."

Damn, Allison thought, he had been paying more attention than she had thought.

Hamish looked at her. "Who are you, girl?"

Allison was silent.

"What's your name?" asked Hamish a little louder.

Again, Allison was silent, but her mind and heart were racing. What could she do? In her panic, she briefly considered threatening Hamish with revealing his secret, but then what would he do to her? That probably wouldn't help her. But she couldn't think of anything else either.

She looked at Cailean, who seemed to be trying to signal her, but she had no idea what he wanted her to do.

All at once, Hamish grabbed her by the collar of her dress and shook her so violently that her teeth snapped together. "What's your name?" he roared.

"Allison," she groaned. Stay as close to the truth as possible, she thought.

"And?"

But she did not want to answer that. She only just managed to shake her head.

He raised his hand to strike her, and Allison was already cowering when Cailean grabbed Hamish by the arm and held him. "You don't want to do that. What would Ila think of you?"

Furious, Hamish turned to him without letting go of Allison. "I couldn't care less what that child thinks."

"But you certainly care what Rhona thinks of you."

Hamish growled and lowered his hand. But then he shook Allison again. "If you don't tell me right now, you're going to feel what it's like to mess with the Laird of the Maclean clan."

Allison realized that he really was going to hurt her and that Cailean wouldn't be able to stop him much longer either. She had to tell him something. And maybe it was best if she stayed as close to the truth as possible. Just as he was about to go at her again, she blurted out, "Grant. Allison Grant."

Suddenly, the room went quiet, and the three men stared at her with their mouths open. Oh God, Allison thought, I said something wrong. She tried desperately to remember if there had been anything in the Macleans' history about a feud with the Grants. She would have remembered that, even if she hadn't been paying close attention, because that was her own last name, and she would have noticed. She tried to send Cailean a silent question, but he was stony-faced and looked rather shocked.

"Who sent you?" Hamish demanded. His voice sounded dangerously calm.

"No one," Allison groaned, preparing for him to shake her again.

In fact, Hamish did tense his arm, but Cailean said, "I think she's lying."

"Of course, she's lying," Hamish roared. "Somebody must have sent her. A woman can't come up with something like that on her own."

Despite her fear, Allison felt a spark of habitual resistance stirring. Of course, a woman could think up something like that. But she suppressed the thought because it was anything but useful.

Cailean stepped forward a bit. "No, I meant claiming to be a Grant. If you ask me, she's English."

"English?" retorted Hamish, staring at Allison. Then he let her go almost in disgust. Being English seemed to be even worse than being a Grant. "What makes you think that?"

"She was screaming for help earlier, in English. We all heard it, didn't we? And the other day, when I was fighting her, she was cursing in English."

"An Englishwoman?" asked Hamish, puzzled, running his fingers through his hair. "But that doesn't make sense. What does she want here? And why did they send her to kill my father?"

Cailean took a deep breath and said carefully, "Maybe she wasn't here to kill your father."

"Then why?"

Cailean raised his hands. "I don't know. But we should find out."

Hamish stared at her, and Allison went ice cold. It was clear how Hamish wanted to figure it out. By brute force. But then he shook his head. "I think she's a Grant. That would fit those bastards. They never participate in open combat. And as I told you today, Malcolm's men have been spotted in our territory. They're probably lurking nearby, waiting for her signal that the work is done."

Horror rose in Allison as she thought of the conversation between Cailean and Hamish she had overheard a few days ago. "I don't know any Malcolm," she croaked.

But Hamish didn't seem to hear her, and neither did Cailean, who said, "We shouldn't jump to conclusions. You can't just blame him."

"I think I can. He's been after some of our land for a long time. And by any means, even dishonorable ones."

Cailean shook his head. "You don't know that. What if she really is English and has nothing to do with that?"

Hamish wheeled around. "Are you trying to play me for a fool? Why would she do that? And if you keep protecting her, I'll start to think you're in cahoots with her."

Cailean froze. "You should calm down."

"I'll decide for myself when I calm down," Hamish yelled. Then he turned back to Allison. "So, Allison Grant, did Malcolm send you?"

"No," she croaked.

Hamish shook his head. "Then we'll just have to find out who did."

He took another step closer, and Allison involuntarily bent backwards in the chair, but of course, it didn't help. She could not avoid him.

He was looking at her as if she was an annoying insect he intended to kill. His gaze fell on her neck, and suddenly, he stumbled. "What is that?" he demanded.

It was clear to Allison that he meant the amulet. Apparently, he also knew what it was. She didn't answer, because what could she say?

"Where did you get that?"

Again, Allison decided to stick close to the truth. "From a friend."

Hamish turned to Cailean. "Didn't your grandmother wear one of those?"

Allison's heart beat faster when she realized that Hamish had just given her an important piece of information. But unfortunately, she couldn't do anything with it at the moment.

Cailean pretended to see the amulet for the first time. Finally, he shrugged. "It's possible. I don't remember exactly."

Hamish laughed bitterly. "That's a new one, you not remembering something."

Cailean took a deep breath. "My grandmother was buried with her

amulet. It can't be hers."

Hamish grimaced. "But if I remember correctly, your grandmother's mother was a Grant. Maybe it's a family sign."

Allison felt sick to her stomach. The noose was tightening around her neck.

Before Cailean could answer, Hamish suddenly grabbed her by the shoulder and ripped the amulet off her neck with his other hand.

"No," Allison screamed in extreme pain after Hamish had pulled so hard on the necklace. But he did not react.

"You know what we're going to do? We're going to send Malcolm Grant this amulet, and maybe he'll do something to free her. And if not, at least we'll know he didn't send it."

"He didn't send me," Allison shouted, but Hamish didn't even acknowledge her.

Cailean looked over at her briefly, then shook his head. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"But I do," Hamish said almost gleefully before turning serious again. "And if you say anything against it again, I'll throw you in the dungeon right along with her, where she'll wait for the answer from good Malcolm."

Allison gasped. He was going to lock her in the dungeon?

"Please don't," she pleaded, ashamed of her own fear.

Hamish turned to her, holding a knife.

"Hamish," Cailean warned.

But he grabbed Allison's hair, and just as she cried out, he unceremoniously cut a lock off her hair. In the process, he let the knife dance dangerously close to her face.

When he let go of her, Allison slumped down, gasping. Frozen, she watched Hamish hand the amulet and the lock of hair to Angus.

"Find a man who is trustworthy and dares to ride to the Grants. But not a MacGilvie," he warned him.

Cailean clenched his teeth.

"Please, not the amulet," Allison said softly. "Please." But only Cailean seemed to hear her. And he, too, gave her only a quick glance.

"Take her to the dungeon," Hamish commanded to the two men still standing behind her as her guards.

"Give her two blankets, some food, and something to drink," Cailean instructed them.

"No," Hamish barked.

"Yes, you will," Cailean objected. "You're not a monster, Hamish. You shouldn't treat a woman like that. And what if she really is innocent? How are you then going to account for letting an innocent woman die a miserable death in your dungeon? You know it could take weeks for Malcolm to answer."

Allison gasped. Weeks? She couldn't wait in a dungeon that long. Oh God, what was she going to do?

Hamish took a deep breath. "Whatever," he grumbled.

The guards pulled Allison to her feet and led her out of the room. She wasn't sure whether her legs would give out from under her. She staggered as her blood rushed to her head. He would indeed throw her into the dungeon. Why had she escaped to this era? And why hadn't she listened to Caitrin?

Allison had completely lost all sense of time. Although the dungeon was not as bad as she had imagined, it was the most horrible place she had ever been. She had actually been given two blankets, a bucket to use as a toilet, fresh water, and food every day, and most of the time, she even had a small oil lamp.

Nevertheless, she was desperate. The dungeon did not have a window, and she didn't know if it was day or night. She slept off and on but did not know for how long. The floor was hard, and her whole body ached. But most of all, the uncertainty and loneliness were getting to her.

She had not been chained or bound and could move freely in the small room. From what she had seen in movies, it was probably a very comfortable prison, yet she was so distressed that most of the time, all she could do was sob in panic. And there was no one and nothing to comfort her in this bare cell. There were a few moments when she felt better, but then she would cry for hours without being able to calm down.

She had rarely been afraid in her life, but ever since she had met Hamish Maclean, and especially since he had locked her down here, fear had been her constant companion, leaving her breathless.

Allison used all the relaxation techniques she knew. Unfortunately, those weren't very many, and they didn't work. Progressive muscle relaxation was certainly good for burnout when you were recovering at home, but it wasn't meant for a 16th-century dungeon.

Only the thought of her friends occasionally brought her a little peace. She imagined Caitrin telling her she was strong and not to be afraid. In her head, Jenna explained something pragmatic, and Lauren took care of her with food and a tight hug.

The guards who brought her food and emptied the bucket did not speak to her or answer any of her questions.

The strangest thing was that Allison felt so lost without her amulet as if she was stranded at a foreign airport and had lost her ticket. Her amulet was now on its way to this Malcolm Grant, and since he likely

didn't know its significance, he probably wouldn't know what to make of it.

Would he throw it away? Would she ever be able to retrieve the amulet from him?

Even if she was released and Hamish stopped accusing her of killing the Laird, she had no way to travel home.

She was just sleeping a bit when she heard a noise at the door. It didn't sound like the guards. Plus, they never came at this time.

What was it? Or rather, who was it?

She rose, walked out of the glow of the oil lamp, and retreated into the darkness. She wanted to make sure that the advantage was on her side, whoever it might be.

The door opened, but no light came in from outside. So, it wasn't the guards because they always carried a torch.

Then a figure stepped into the room. Allison recognized him immediately.

Cailean.

And suddenly, she realized that the despair gnawing at her also grew from the fact that she felt he had abandoned her. Although she knew he didn't owe her anything and she couldn't expect him to take care of her, he was the only person here who could help her. And he knew that, too. Still, he had never come by for the past days or maybe even weeks.

He stared at the blankets, and the lamp then searched the darkness, but apparently, he couldn't see her.

"Allison?"

"What do you want?" she asked dismissively, her voice hoarse since she hadn't used it for such a long time.

He entered and closed the door behind him. "How are you?" he asked, looking in her direction.

She was silent.

"Are you okay?"

"No," she said, annoyed at his stupid question, even though a little voice in the back of her head reminded her that he probably wasn't sure how to handle this situation either. "What do you want?"

He hesitated. "I need to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Can you come into the light?"

Allison hesitated. She didn't want him to see her like this. She felt repulsive. But then she thought maybe it would make him feel bad if he saw her condition, and she stepped stiffly into the light.

He looked her over from head to toe, but he didn't make a face and asked seriously, "Are you hurt?"

Allison shook her head. "Just dirty." And desperate, she added

silently.

"I'm sorry he locked you down here."

Allison crossed her arms. "Then why didn't you do anything?"

At least he had the decency to lower his head for a moment, ashamed. "Because there was no other way."

"Do you at least believe me?"

He nodded. "I know you didn't kill the Laird." He took a deep breath. "And if I'd had a chance, I would have come sooner. But I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because I had to wait for the Laird's funeral. Hamish is finding his way in his new role, and I have to support him in that."

"Those are excellent reasons, of course," Allison said, hearing for herself how bitter she sounded.

"He is just beginning to forget that he has you locked up down here. I've made sure he has so much to do that he doesn't have much time to think about you."

"How noble of you," Allison sneered. On the one hand, the thought of Hamish forgetting her was comforting, but on the other hand, it could mean that she would be jailed for much longer than she had anticipated. That thought filled her with horror. But she tried not to let it show.

Cailean regarded her thoughtfully. "You always fill me with wonder."

Allison jutted her chin. "Oh yeah?"

He nodded. "Yes. You never stop fighting, do you?"

She was actually about to do just that, simply because she had no more strength, but she couldn't tell him that. Her throat tightened, and she pressed her lips tightly together. She would not cry.

"What do you want?" she choked out.

"To help you get out of here."

His words took her breath away. "Why?" she asked.

He reached under his plaid and pulled out a piece of parchment. Allison recognized it immediately. It was the letter she had written him. "Because you kept your part of our bargain, and now I want to keep mine." He looked at the parchment. "It took me a few days to find it. But I thank you for taking the trouble to hide this explosive information well."

"Do you believe me?" asked Allison.

Cailean grimaced. "It was hard for me at first, but to be honest, it all makes sense, and maybe I've always suspected it." He looked at her. "And now I also understand why he locked you down here and why he wanted you out of the castle. It must not have been easy for you."

His words lifted a burden off Allison's shoulders that she hadn't even known was there. She just nodded.

He smiled. "And now I want you to finally find this object that has the amulet design carved into it. I assume it's a stone?"

Allison nodded again and hunched her shoulders. She could hardly believe what he was saying. "Do you know where the stone is?"

To her disappointment, he shook his head. "No."

"Then why are you here? If I don't know where the stone is, I can't leave."

He frowned. In the past few days or possibly weeks, she had had a lot of time to think about the amulet and about what Hamish had said about Cailean's grandmother.

"I will take you to my grandmother's house. Maybe you can find a clue there to help you."

"Your grandmother was the gatekeeper, wasn't she?"

He frowned again. "I can only sort of imagine what that could be, but I'm guessing that's what she was. She died a few weeks ago."

Allison nodded in a daze. That part had continually played over and over again like a movie in her head. Cailean had mentioned that his grandmother was buried with the amulet. She had hoped so much that she had imagined that.

"She wore the amulet?"

He nodded. "Always."

A shadow flitted across his face, as it always did when they talked about the amulet.

"And you buried her with it?"

He nodded.

The familiar panic returned, and her throat tightened. She forced herself to calm down and asked, "Did she have more of them?"

Perplexed, he raised his shoulders. "I don't know. That's why I want to take you to our house. This stone may even be there."

"Is there anyone else who wears an amulet like hers?" asked Allison.

He hesitated and studied her face. Then he said, "I was away for a long time, and when I came back a few months ago, my sister was wearing one."

Allison inhaled sharply. Why was he only telling her about this now? "Where is your sister? Can I talk to her?"

Again he hesitated and pressed his lips together. A realization came over Allison. "Is she dead, too?" she blurted out.

Horror was suddenly on his face. "No." He hesitated. "I don't know."

"Why not?"

"Because she's gone."

"Gone where? You said she went to gather herbs. Hasn't she returned yet?"

He stared at her, and she could see his internal struggle. Finally, he said, "She's not gathering herbs. She's disappeared, and I don't know where."

Allison's knees threatened to give way under her. She thought she knew very well where Rhona had gone. "When did she leave?"

"She disappeared shortly after our grandmother's funeral."

"And you don't know where she might be? Are there no clues?"

He shook his head. "But I know she would never stay away that long gathering herbs. Especially not after grandmother died."

Allison swayed, and Cailean grabbed her arm. "What is it?"

She struggled with herself. Should she tell him that his sister had traveled to another time? And what did that mean for her? There was no longer a gatekeeper here and no one who wore the amulet. But the stone still existed if Rhona had used it to travel. Oh damn, if only she had her amulet.

Still holding her by the elbow, he looked at her piercingly.

Allison forced herself to remain calm. "What else do you know about the amulet, other than that your grandmother wore it?"

He took a deep breath. "Nothing about the amulet itself, but in all the years we've lived here, there have been things I couldn't explain."

"What kind of things?"

"Sometimes women showed up at our house who my grandmother referred to as her charges. I believed her, of course. After all, I was a child."

Breathless, Allison stared at him. "Who were those women?"

"They were so different from any other people I knew." He hesitated. "A lot like you. They didn't quite fit in, and they spoke differently. Some cried some were hysterical, some seemed confused. Rhona and I sometimes made fun of them and wondered what kind of a strange family we had."

"Do you know where these women came from?"

He shook his head. "They didn't come the normal way through the valleys or the roads. Most of the time, they simply arrived."

"And then?"

"At some point, they were just gone again. Only one traveled from here to Edinburgh."

Allison wiped her forehead with her hand. "Your grandmother really was the gatekeeper," she said softly. And she had missed her by only a few weeks. If she had still been alive, she would have had a way home right away.

"What does that mean?" he asked, sounding as perplexed as she felt.

Allison swallowed. She had no idea how much she was allowed to tell him. He had seen the women who traveled through time himself, though he didn't know who or what they were exactly. His sister could apparently travel, and it would only be fair for him to know that. But she would not and could not discuss this with him now. She had to take care of herself, and that meant getting out of this dungeon.

"Let's go to your grandmother's house first," she said.

"First, tell me what you know about her," he urged.

Allison shook her head. "As soon as I find the stone and have an amulet, I will explain everything you need to know. I promise."

She could tell by his expression that he wanted to know right now, but she had to get out of here. Finally, he nodded. "All right. You've already proven to me that you honor agreements. We can leave for the house now." He made a somewhat pained expression. "But could you please let go of my arm?"

Startled, Allison looked down at her hands. They had clawed into his forearm. Immediately, she let go of him. "Sorry," she murmured.

He rubbed the spot where Allison's fingernails had dug deep into his skin. "I see you haven't lost any of your strength down here." He sighed and turned toward the door. "Come on, let's go."

Allison hesitated. "We can leave this easily?"

Cailean nodded. "Don't worry, it's the middle of the night, and I know my way around, fortunately. It's not far."

Allison sincerely hoped he was right because their actual destination, though a little closer, was still a universe away.

When Cailean opened the small door leading outside, and the fresh air rushed in, Allison almost cried. She hadn't known how much she had missed it. If she was honest, there had been moments when she was sure she would never get out of that dungeon alive.

As Cailean had said, it was the middle of the night. It was pitch dark with only a thin crescent moon, but the clouds immediately pushed in front of it.

Cailean signaled to her to be silent as they left the dungeon, and although she wanted to ask which way they were going, Allison said nothing. They crept through both torch-lit and darkened corridors and encountered no one. Allison noticed that Cailean wore a rather large sword on his hip that she had never seen him with before. It gave her a strange feeling of calm to see him wear it so naturally.

The realization that she was traveling with a battle-hardened 16th century Highlander amazed her to no end. This whole experience was so surreal that there were moments when she felt like an actor in a historical movie. But the fear, the foul smell in the dungeon, the cold, the hunger, and the despair quickly brought her back to reality that this was not a movie, even if everything did seem surreal.

The sounds and smells of the night overwhelmed Allison as looked around, but she couldn't see anything. She sensed that Cailean had started moving because suddenly she was standing alone against the wall of the castle towering high above her. But where was he? She could not see him.

Immediately, she was gripped by an almost crushing fear. She was about to call out to him when she felt his strong hand close around hers and pull her along. She stumbled after him on shaky legs, concentrating on not letting go.

At first, she felt grass under her feet, then they went down a slope. Her shoulders brushed branches and, once, a smaller tree. Still, she could barely see and didn't dare let go of Cailean.

After a while, he stopped, still holding her hand. "Is everything all right?" he asked. Apparently, they were far enough from the castle

that they could talk again, even if only quietly.

"I can't see anything," Allison whispered.

"Hold on to me. We will have to walk for a while."

"Can you see anything?"

"Just a little bit, but I know the way very well. We're going to walk through the forest a little more, so keep close to me. I'll let you know if there's a rock or a twig."

He spoke softly and close to her ear. She realized how dangerous it still was.

On impulse, she squeezed his hand. "Thank you."

He remained silent but stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. It was a strangely intimate gesture and one that reassured Allison. "It's an honor."

He had said that once before. At the very beginning, when she had been in his room. Allison realized that she had felt unjustly abandoned by him.

"Let's keep moving," he said.

And so, she stumbled on behind him all through the night. Eventually, her eyes got used to the darkness, and she could see lighter things like big stones or birch trees with their white bark. She also could see her hand resting in his, which gave her back a little peace.

As they stepped out of the woods and reached a path in a meadow, the moon peeked out from behind the clouds again. Tomorrow would be the new moon, and Allison was startled. She must have made a noise because Cailean stopped and turned to her. "What is it?"

"It was a full moon when..." she broke off, searching for the right words, "when that happened in the Great Hall. Now it's a new moon."

"Yes," was all he said.

"I was down there for two weeks?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

It seemed like half a lifetime to her.

"Can we keep moving?" he asked.

Allison nodded, and they continued on their way. She thought about the fact that she had now been gone for more than three weeks. She wondered what Caitrin and the others thought. By now, Evan had certainly told why she had to leave. But no one knew where she had ended up. The others must be worried. If only she could send them a message, or better yet, return home.

She prayed she would find an amulet and a clue to the stone at Cailean's grandmother's house. The thought that she might even be able to travel home that very night made her legs go weak, and she clung to Cailean's hand even more. He began stroking the back of her hand soothingly again. And suddenly, she was very grateful she had

met this man who had at least some understanding of women traveling through time.

They emerged into a small forest. "It's right here," Cailean said.

Allison looked around. She couldn't see anything, but her companion continued walking purposefully.

"We're in the courtyard," he said a short time later. Allison could only tell by the sounds that her surroundings had changed. It was as if her footsteps were echoing off walls.

All of a sudden, excitement spread through Allison. For the first time, she had a real chance to find the stone and return home. All at once, she was overwhelmed by homesickness to such an extent that her throat tightened. But she was determined not to cry.

Cailean stopped and let go of her hand. Allison suddenly felt strangely abandoned, and fear started taking hold again.

"Wait. I'll make light," he said.

She heard him move a few steps away. Then a door creaked.

Allison froze as she thought she heard a thump coming from the other side. She hoped Cailean returned quickly. She didn't like this darkness at all.

Then she saw a glimmer of light shining through the darkness. The light from a lamp was illuminating Cailean's face as he closed the door of a barn. Slowly he made his way back to her, and Allison exhaled in relief. Light always made things better. She had always felt that way on research trips, too, especially when she could turn on her phone flashlight. Light changed so many things. Suddenly, she was very grateful they had given her the oil lamp in the dungeon. She wondered if she might have gone crazy by now if she had been forced to sit in the dark.

He held the lamp a little higher to look at her, and the light flickered across his face as well. "Ready?"

"Yes," Allison said quietly. She just wanted to go home.

To her surprise, he took her hand again and began leading her further. Out of the darkness, a gray stone house appeared. It was larger than she had expected. It seemed to have several rooms and maybe even a second floor.

Cailean opened the wooden door and entered. Allison's heart pounded as she followed him in. If all went well, soon, she would be able to leave this house with an amulet.

They stood in a small room with a wooden floor and a table. Several cloaks hung on a hook, and wicker baskets of various sizes stood on the floor. The scent of flowers, combined with stale air, hung in the room. Several bundles of dried plants were hanging from the ceiling.

Again, Allison thought she heard a noise. She was about to call

Cailean's attention to it when he tensed up. Something was wrong.

He stood stock-still, then released her hand and placed his on the hilt of his sword. Fear, which by now had become Allison's constant companion, crept up her spine.

The small lamp illuminated only a section of the room, and as Allison stared into the darkness, she suddenly felt that they were no longer alone.

Then the door slammed shut behind her. Allison wheeled around and cried out as a dark figure moved toward her and grabbed her. A hissing sound rang out, and it took her a moment to realize that Cailean must have unsheathed his sword. An arm closed around her like a vice, then she felt something cold on her neck.

"Put the sword down, MacGilvie or I'll slit her throat," said a deep male voice right next to her ear.

Allison could not suppress a whimper as she realized the man's words. She had a dagger at her throat!

Cailean breathed heavily as he appraised the man. He already had both hands on the hilt and lunged, although that was almost impossible in such a small space. Even Allison realized he was at a disadvantage with his huge sword if the other had a knife.

Cailean hesitated, then lowered his sword. Immediately, two other men were beside him, taking his sword and restraining him. Cailean appeared to weigh fighting back, but the man holding Allison pressed the knife harder against her neck, and she cried out. Cailean clenched his hands into fists and lowered them. Almost instantly, one of the men twisted his hands behind his back.

Her attacker's grip loosened, and the knife at her throat disappeared. Gasping, Allison tried to put distance between herself and the man, but he continued to restrain her. "Easy, girl," he admonished, but he didn't sound unkind even though he had just threatened to kill her.

"Who are you?" asked Cailean, turning his head to get a glimpse of the two men beside him. All three were wearing shirts and belted plaids. However, theirs were a different color than Cailean's or the Macleans'.

Puzzled, Allison looked at Cailean. She had assumed they were Hamish's men who had finally noticed that their prisoner had disappeared.

The man standing next to Cailean appeared to be the leader. With a small bow, he said, "We are here to extend greetings from Laird Malcolm Grant. He wishes us to accompany you to him."

Allison stared at him. Malcolm Grant? What could that mean?

Cailean glanced at her. He seemed just as confused as she was. There was a question in his gaze, and Allison shook her head. She

knew even less about who these men were and what they wanted.

Cailean straightened up a little. "I'm not planning on going to Grant's."

The man raised an eyebrow. "You don't have any choice, MacGilvie. After all, there are three of us and one of you. And our orders are clear. We can't return without you. That's why we've been waiting here for you for the last few days. You took your time."

He didn't sound unfriendly either. He seemed to be enjoying himself a bit.

Cailean gritted his teeth and shot Allison another look she didn't understand. Did he want her to do something? But what? She couldn't fight three armed men.

"I'm not going," Cailean said quietly now.

The other laughed. "Oh yes, you will."

"What does Grant want from me?"

"You'll see later. Now come on. We've wasted enough time."

Allison felt as if Cailean was looking for a way to fight back, but he stood no chance against three men, all of whom were armed and had disarmed him.

The man grabbed him by the arm and led him outside. "We've even brought a horse for you, MacGilvie. Then you won't have to walk all the way to Freuchie Castle."

"How kind," growled Cailean.

"And remember, if you try to run, it won't go well for her."

He pointed his thumb at Allison.

Cailean's face grew even more serious. "Leave her out of this."

Allison wanted to follow the men outside, but the one who had held the knife to her throat shook his head. "You stay here, girl."

Cailean stopped abruptly. "She's coming with me."

"No," said the leader. "We only have orders for you."

He frowned. "Why? Aren't you here for her?"

One of them shook his head. "No," he said curtly.

"But aren't you here because of the message?"

"What message?"

Cailean exchanged a glance with Allison, and she could feel how tense he was. This was about something completely different and had nothing to do with her.

Suddenly she was relieved because she did not want to leave. She shouldn't travel any further away from the stone, even if Malcolm Grant did have her amulet. But then it occurred to her that she couldn't stay here without Cailean either. He was the only one who could protect her.

The leader tried to pull Cailean further. However, he stood his ground. "She's my wife. Where I go, she goes."

Allison stared at him and opened her mouth to say something, but he shook his head slightly.

The leader leaned over to the man holding Cailean and mumbled something. Then one shrugged and said, "All right. But we only have one horse. Now let's get going. It's a long way to Freuchie. I can't wait to get out of this hell hole."

She wanted to scream that she didn't want to go but had no strength left. The men pulled Cailean further into the darkness, and the man who had just held the knife to Allison's neck picked her up without further ado and clamped her under his arm like an object.

Allison was so shocked she forgot to scream. Besides,, who was going to help her? Definitely not the Macleans because she certainly didn't want to draw their attention. Cailean wasn't in any position to help her, but he also wanted her to come along.

What was going on here? Maybe he had a plan, and they could escape as soon as they were on the horse. At least that's what she hoped.

One of the men brought four horses from the stable. All of them were dark and hard to see at night. One of the animals was tied to one of the others and was meant for Cailean. When he was settled in the saddle, the large man, still holding Allison, unceremoniously lifted her onto the horse behind him.

"Put her in front of me," Cailean instructed him.

"Ian?" the large man asked, turning to the leader.

He nodded curtly, and already the large man was heaving Allison into the saddle in front of Cailean.

"Untie my hands," he said.

"No," the leader objected.

"But I can't hold her if my hands are tied. And the ride is long. If she falls asleep and falls off the horse, that helps no one. Besides, I can't escape anyway if my horse is tied to yours."

The leader sighed. "All right." He turned to the other men. "Watch your weapons when you untie him. You know what they say about him."

Allison looked questioningly at Cailean, but he didn't respond. A few minutes later, his hands were free, and he pulled her a little towards him.

One of the men went back into the house carrying the lamp and returned shortly with a large bag and Cailean's sword. He stowed all this on his horse.

"What the hell..." she heard Cailean mutter.

The man extinguished the lamp, and the horses started to move.

Allison hadn't ridden in a long time and never in a dress, side-saddle, at night, and in the rain to boot. She clung to the mane and

cursed softly.

"Are you all right?" asked Cailean, pulling her a little closer so that she was leaning against his chest. The pommel of the saddle rubbed uncomfortably against her thighs.

"No," she whispered.

Without further ado, she swung one leg over the horse's neck so that she was straddling the horse. That caused her dress to ride up to her knees, but at least she was more secure and comfortable.

To her surprise, she heard Cailean laugh softly, or rather, she felt it in his chest since she was leaning against it. "What is it?" she asked.

"You never cease to amaze me."

She turned her head slightly to look at his face when it occurred to her that he had used the informal form of address. But after all, they had been through together, it certainly seemed appropriate. Besides, he had passed her off as his wife, so it was better if it appeared to the outside world that they were on familiar terms.

The rain was falling heavier now, and she felt Cailean move. The next moment he wrapped his plaid around her and arranged it so that they were both covered.

"It's going to be a long ride, so it's better if we don't get soaked to the bone right away."

Allison was grateful for the protection from the rain and for the warmth. She was already beginning to freeze in her thin dress in the cool night air. "How long is the trip?" she asked softly.

"If we really are riding to Malcolm Grant, three days."

Allison sat up a little. "Three days?"

She could feel him nodding. "It's not that far."

"And what would you," she bit her lip, "call far?"

He chuckled softly, "The Sinclair area, for example, where my mother is from. That's a good ten days, more in bad weather."

He pulled her close to him again.

Allison turned her head and leaned as close to his ear as possible. "Are you going to try to escape?"

He took a deep breath. "No, probably not."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't stand a chance against those three. Besides, I want to know what Malcolm Grant wants from me. None of this makes any sense."

"Do you know him?"

He shook his head. "I've never met him. But everyone knows who he is. I thought they came for you, but they didn't know about you. Something's wrong."

Still, he didn't sound worried, more curious.

"What do you think this Malcolm guy is going to do with you?"

He hesitated. "I don't know. But they didn't arrive with hostile intent."

Allison snorted. "Not hostile? That's not what it looked like to me. He held a knife to my throat."

"If they had wanted to hurt us, they would have done so already. Besides, they took my sword. That means they plan to give it back to me at some point. My money is more on Malcolm wanting information or trying to form an alliance now that the Laird is dead."

Allison frowned and tried to make out the men in the darkness, but she could only hear the other horses making their way through the night. "So that means you actually want to go see Grant?"

"I'm afraid we have no choice."

"I already had something else planned. Why did you bring me?" she asked, trying not to sound bitter.

"Because I'm sworn to protect you, and I can't very well do that if I'm not at Dundarg. Besides, you're safer from Hamish here."

"But if I had found the amulet at your grandmother's house, I might have been gone before dawn."

He didn't answer right away, but instead, one of the men said, "Hush."

Only now did Allison realize that she had raised her voice.

Cailean leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Remember that Malcolm Grant has your amulet. Now get some rest. You've been through a lot in the last few weeks."

Allison didn't want to sleep, and she didn't want to sit on that horse and keep moving away from the gate. She wanted to go home. However, she had to admit that it was pleasant to be leaning against Cailean, encircled by his arms and wrapped in his plaid and breathing in his scent. It was much more pleasant than lying on the stone floor of the dungeon and not knowing whether she'd ever see daylight again.

She knew he'd take care of her and also that it was the right decision to bring her along. And maybe eventually, she'd be able to admit that, even though at the moment, she felt more bitterness than anything else.

Since she could hardly attempt an escape on her own, she actually closed her eyes and let herself be lulled to sleep by the warmth and gentle shaking of the horse's back.

She had, in fact, managed to sleep for a while because when she awoke, the sun was already rising above the horizon. It had stopped raining, but the plaid and her skirt were wet. So were the horses and the other men still riding them, all wrapped in their plaids. She stirred, and Cailean stroked her hand briefly under the plaid. "You're awake."

She nodded. "Where are we?"

"Still on the Macleans' land. That means we won't be stopping long."

Allison tensed as she grasped the information. "I wonder if Hamish is following us yet."

Cailean shook his head. "I made sure no one would notice for at least a few days that you were gone. And the earliest he'll probably notice I'm gone is this morning, but possibly a little later."

At that moment, Ian gave the signal to stop. They were in a small copse, and Allison heard a brook babbling nearby. They dismounted, and she saw the men looking at them warily but also curiously. They all had their hands on their swords. She remembered Ian saying last night that they shouldn't trust Cailean. She wondered what they were saying about him. Suddenly she was a little curious too.

Cailean threw back the plaid and raised his hands to show he had no hidden weapons. The second man, whose job seemed to be to guard Cailean, looked relieved. But then Allison noticed him staring at her legs, and immediately she swung her leg back over the horse's neck and demurely covered her lower legs. She had forgotten all about that.

Cailean helped her slide off the horse, and the tall man with the red hair who had threatened her with the knife last night caught her. It was just as well because she was so stiff, she almost fell over. How many hours had they spent on horseback? Once again, she had lost all sense of time.

Cailean slid off the horse behind her and immediately stepped close beside her.

"Short break," Ian said. "We'll water the horses, take care of our needs, and then ride on." He looked at Allison and pointed to a bush. "You can go there. Alone. And don't get any ideas."

Allison exchanged a glance with Cailean, who gave her a reassuring nod. So she disappeared into the bushes, gathered her skirts, and relieved herself. It was a strange feeling to be doing this out here, solely among men. Fortunately, they couldn't see her.

When she finished, she walked over to the stream and washed her hands and face. A little further down, the large man was watering the horses.

Allison decided to try to wash herself, at least in a makeshift way. After spending all those weeks in the dungeon, she was filthy. She couldn't get to all parts of her body, of course, and certainly not the important ones, but she was able to stealthily wash her legs under her skirts and at least a little under her arms and the back of her neck. With her fingers, she combed her hair, still damp from the rain, and then took a long, stiff blade of grass to use as a hairband. It held up reasonably well and would keep her hair out of her face for at least a little while.

She flinched when suddenly someone was standing next to her. It was Ian. He looked at her. "Are you really his wife?"

Allison quickly weighed her options. Since she trusted Cailean more than this man, and she needed to protect him as much as he needed to protect her, she said, "Yes."

The man looked at her with narrowed eyes. "What's your name?"

"Allison."

"And?"

She took a deep breath. This game again. This time, however, she would not tell the truth. "MacGilvie. Allison MacGilvie."

He still seemed to be trying to decide whether to believe her. "And where are you from?"

Allison felt that familiar fear quickly rising inside her. She hoped she would give the right answer this time and said, "From Glen Duisk."

He just growled, then gave her one last sharp look. "We should ride on."

Allison made her way back to the horse she shared with Cailean. As soon as he mounted, the large man tried to lift her up, but Cailean bent down and unceremoniously pulled her up in front of him. At first, she sat sidesaddle, but then he said softly, "Sit, so it's comfortable."

Again she swung her leg over the horse's mane. When he noticed her bare lower leg, he covered it with his plaid. The other side remained free, but no one rode on that side.

"Not that anyone's looking at my wife's legs," he said softly, and

Allison had to smile.

She leaned against him, and as the horses started to move, he whispered in her ear, "Did he do something to you?"

She shook her head. "Just asking questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"Just my name and where I'm from."

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth. My name is Allison MacGilvie, and I'm from Glen Duisk."

She could feel the laughter in his chest, and he pulled her tighter against him. "Well done."

They continued on their way, and Allison looked around. The landscape was slowly becoming a little rougher. There were fewer and fewer forests but more meadows, heaths, and here and there even exposed rocks. She didn't see a single road, only once an abandoned hut and no other people. Not even animals, except for a few birds and rabbits. No sheep and no cattle either, which in those days, Caitrin had told her, were mainly kept in the Highlands. The sheep had arrived much later.

She could sense Cailean's exhaustion, and the other men seemed tired as well. She wondered when they would stop to sleep. But apparently, the men wanted to leave the Macleans' land as soon as possible. Now that she knew they were going to the Grants' territory, she also wanted make it there so that Hamish wouldn't be able to catch them. And to be honest, she was curious about the clan whose name she bore.

When the sun had already risen a little higher, she turned to Cailean and said, "If you need to sleep, feel free to lean on me."

He shook his head. "I'll be fine."

Allison frowned. "You seem very tired, though."

He shrugged. "I've been through worse. Besides, we'll be resting soon."

He was right, just over an hour later, they stopped in a forest with huge boulders that formed natural overhangs, which served as shelter from the rain that was starting again.

"We'll take a break for a few hours," Ian said. "We'll continue tonight."

Cailean helped Allison off the horse. "You're taking the road across the Ranalds'land?" he asked almost casually.

"Aye," Ian said, eyeing him suspiciously. "We wouldn't be riding through your valley, of course."

Cailean nodded and walked into one of the rock formations with foliage under its overhang. "We'll sleep there. Will you build a fire?"

Ian shook his head, then turned to the large man. "Tie those two

up. Don't let them get any ideas."

Cailean groaned but held out his hands to the man. Allison disappeared behind a bush for a moment. Then her hands were tied as well. Fortunately, not behind her back, so at least she'd be able to lie down.

Cailean pointed into the shelter. "Lie down facing the wall."

Allison did as he said, but it was awkward because she could barely use her hands to support herself. As soon as she was lying down, she felt Cailean lay down behind her, shielding her from the rain and from the other men's stares. She closed her eyes, but it was so strange to be lying in a rain-soaked forest with her hands tied that she couldn't sleep. She stared at the wall and listened to the sounds of the other men. One seemed to be keeping watch, and at least one was asleep since she heard snoring from the opposite side of their little camp. They didn't seem particularly worried either. Only when they feared that Cailean was going to try to escape did their behavior change. Allison couldn't really make heads or tails of all this.

To be honest, she was worried about what to expect from Malcolm Grant. Who was this man? And what did he want from Cailean? But most of all, she worried about what it could mean for her.

She listened to the sounds of the forest around her and to Cailean's steady breathing. It was no wonder he was asleep. He must have been exhausted after the long ride and the all-nighter after freeing her from the dungeon. She was tired, too, but fear kept her from sleeping.

At some point, she realized that her left arm had fallen asleep. Carefully, she turned onto her back at first, but the space was too narrow for that, and a stone stabbed her in the back. So she turned onto her right side and now lay facing Cailean.

She woke him up with her restlessness, and he opened his eyes, immediately looking alarmed. He attempted to sit up, but Allison shook her head. "It's all right. Go back to sleep," she whispered.

He angled his arms so that his bound hands were right next to hers and gently slid his fingers between hers. His brown eyes gazed at her calmly, then he smiled. "Get some sleep, too. You need the strength."

Reassured, Allison closed her eyes and drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

Late in the afternoon, they were awakened by the large man and continued their journey. The clouds had cleared, and they rode late into the evening, taking advantage of the longer days before nightfall. Then they stopped again to rest, and this time Ian lit a fire. Allison was grateful since it allowed her to dry her skirts a little. She was quite warm because she had spent most of the day leaning against Cailean on the horse or sleeping next to him. He radiated an incredible warmth she had never experienced in a person. However,

she had to admit that she had also never sat so close to another person for such a long time. And his closeness didn't make her uncomfortable, quite the opposite, in fact.

The procedure at the night camp was the same as in the afternoon. They ate, were tied up, and went to sleep. This time, however, they turned to each other right away, and Allison felt Cailean stroking her hand with his thumb until she fell asleep.

As morning dawned, they set out. The three men were no longer scowling, and Allison gathered from their expressions that they had crossed into the territory of a friendly clan.

Over the next days, a certain routine crept in as they were riding. Sometimes she and Cailean talked in whispers, but never about escape or what awaited them at Malcolm Grant's, nor about what had happened in the Great Hall or about the amulet. The other men, on the other hand, were very silent, and Allison feared they were hearing more of their conversations than they were letting on.

Allison had noticed that Ian kept eyeing her and Cailean suspiciously. She, on the other hand, thought they were playing their roles as husband and wife, not badly at all. And although she still wasn't comfortable with moving so far away from the gate, she was glad to be near Cailean. He had become her anchor during this time.

It was mid-morning, and they had only left a few hours ago when she leaned back against him to close her eyes for a moment. Then she heard him inhale sharply. Immediately she sat up. "What is it?" she whispered. She could feel the tension coursing through his body.

"I assume we'll be there soon."

He pointed into the distance, and Allison could make out a castle. A mighty castle. And she even knew it, but only as a ruin. Freuchie Castle of the Grants.

What would await her there? A shiver ran over her entire body, and Cailean pulled her a little closer to him.

When they reached the courtyard of Freuchie Castle, some people stared at them curiously. Ian and his two companions suddenly seemed like different people. They were greeting some of the people present and even making a few jokes about how long they had been away.

Cailean, on the other hand, hadn't said a word since they first laid eyes on Freuchie Castle, and she could feel how tense his body was. But it was only a watchful tension, and he still radiated a calm she envied.

She hoped very much that they would not separate her from Cailean. She ran even more of a risk of betraying herself than at the Macleans' castle. She tried to remember the history of her clan, it wasn't much. To be honest, she had never been particularly interested in those old stories. And when she had been preparing to go back in time, it hadn't occurred to her to look into her own clan, she had only learned the essential facts about the Macleans that Caitrin had taught her.

She had last visited Freuchie Castle when she was a teenager and recognized it, even though it looked completely different now, of course. More proof that she really had landed in the past. When she saw places she knew from her time, everything became even more real.

Ian and the other two dismounted but told Cailean and Allison to remain on their horse. They unloaded their things while the large man guarded them. Allison could feel the curious looks on her back. She wondered if they all knew who Cailean was. Could they tell from his plaid?

Finally, Ian signaled them to dismount. Before Cailean helped her off the horse, however, he whispered in her ear, "I'll do everything I can to make sure we stay together. If not, don't try to escape. I will come for you eventually. Be patient and trust me."

She glanced at him. "I trust you," she said softly, knowing it was the truth. He was the only person she could trust here.

Then she slipped off the horse, and Cailean followed her. Ian and the large red-haired man led them down a wooden staircase into the castle. There they crossed a hall, followed by more curious looks. They went up a staircase, down a hallway, down again, through yet another room, and finally up a staircase that apparently led to the Laird's private rooms. Allison felt like Ian had deliberately complicated things so they would lose their bearings.

Finally, he stopped in front of a heavy wooden door. "Wait here."

Cailean pushed in front of Allison and nodded.

Ian knocked, and at the "come in" of a deep male voice, he entered. The door remained ajar.

"Ian, you're back!" that voice now called out. "Well, that took a long time. We were expecting you home several days ago."

"It took longer than expected to find him."

"So, you brought our guest?" The voice sounded pleased.

Allison noticed that Malcolm, at least she assumed this voice belonged to Malcolm Grant, had said "guest" and not "prisoner." Or was that just a euphemism?

Cailean was also listening intently.

"Aye, I did. Cailean MacGilvie," he hesitated briefly, "and his wife."

Allison's stomach tightened. Cailean seemed to sense it because he reached for her hand. She could feel that his fingers were cold for the first time.

Suddenly, another voice was heard, a female voice. "His wife? There must be some mistake."

Cailean froze. There was an incredulous expression on his face. What could it mean? Who was this woman?

"No," Ian said. "He assured us she was his wife, and he was going to bring her."

"It can't be," the voice said.

"Bring them in," Malcolm ordered. He sounded irritated.

Allison began to tremble as the door opened again. Ian looked at her with a frown. "Come in."

She wanted to take a step forward, but Cailean did not move. He was still staring at the door.

"Come on," the redhead grumbled, pushing Cailean forward. That released him from his torpor, and he started moving. Allison followed him, heart pounding. To her horror, he let go of her hand.

Ian opened the door for them and took a step to the side. The room appeared to be a living room of some sort, where work was also being done. At a table sat a tall, black-haired man who rose as they entered the room. From blue eyes, he eyed them curiously but not with hostility. It was clear he was the master of the house and was very sure of himself. He regarded Cailean for a moment but then looked at

Allison and frowned a little. She tried to escape his scrutinizing gaze from those steel-blue eyes and continued to look around.

At the window stood a woman wringing her hands and staring unblinkingly at Cailean. Beside her feet were a few smaller baskets of plants.

It took a moment for Allison to get a good look at her because the glaring light of the midday sun was at her back. But when Allison's eyes adjusted and she recognized the woman correctly, she gasped.

The woman seemed to be a female version of Cailean. And suddenly, she realized that Rhona MacGilvie had not traveled through time but was only a three-day ride away and staying with Malcolm Grant.

She and Cailean stared at each other, then Rhona's gaze moved to Allison. Frowning, she seemed equally unable to place Allison. But then she turned back to Cailean. "Welcome to Freuchie Castle, brother," she said.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Cailean dangerously quietly. "What are you doing here?"

Rhona and Malcolm exchanged a glance, then Malcolm nodded slightly.

"Maybe we'd better discuss this alone," Rhona said, taking a step toward Cailean.

"I don't think there's much to talk about," he said. "Just tell me what you're doing here."

Again, there was an exchange of glances between Rhona and Malcolm, and Allison would have liked to have spoken what was so clear. The two were a couple. But she sensed that Cailean needed to hear it from Rhona.

"Your sister and I..." Malcolm put in, but Cailean raised his hand and shook his head. To Allison's surprise, Malcolm remained silent.

"Tell me, Rhona, why are you here?"

His sister lifted her chin defiantly, but it trembled. "Malcolm and I are getting married."

Allison stood so close to Cailean that she could feel the words hit him. As far as she understood, Malcolm was an enemy of his clan, and his sister was now dating that very man and even wanted to marry him.

For a while, there was silence in the room. "I don't suppose he forced you," Cailean finally said into the silence.

"I would never..." Malcolm said, but this time only a look from Cailean silenced him.

Rhona straightened her shoulders and stepped up to Malcolm. "No, he didn't. We love each other."

Again, it was as if the words physically struck Cailean. Allison

wanted to stand protectively in front of him.

"So why am I here?" he now asked.

"I sent for you so I could tell you myself," Rhona said. "And..." she reached for Malcolm's hand, "we want to talk about what this means for your future."

"My future?" asked Cailean, "It means nothing to me, Rhona."

"Yes, it does, and you know it."

Cailean shook his head. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Rhona wrung her hands and took a step toward her brother. "I've been wrestling with this for months, Cailean. I know very well what I'm talking about. Believe me, if I could have made myself fall in love with someone else, I would have. But that's the way it is, and I hope you can see, too, that maybe we can make it work for us."

She looked at him so desperately that Allison felt for her.

"For months?" asked Cailean, his voice sounding cool. "So, it's been going on that long? And you've been cheating and lying to everyone?"

Rhona's expression became stubborn. "No, I haven't. Grandmother knew about it. And besides, it's my decision who I love."

"Wrong, Rhona, it's not your decision. Not when the future of a clan depends on it."

"But you don't understand. Me being Malcolm's wife will be better for our clan than if I marry anyone else."

"And what about Hamish?"

Rhona's face closed up. "Let me worry about that."

"Oh no, I can't, because it's also my problem. Now I'm in the situation of having to work with him. And that is to protect our clan. Yours and my clan, sister."

Rhona tilted her head slightly and took another step toward them. Allison noticed Malcolm watching her warily and also paying attention to Cailean's every move. It was obvious that he would protect her, whatever happened. And he was quite capable of doing so. He was as tall as Cailean, and his muscles and a scar on his arm revealed that he was no stranger to fighting. Besides, he looked at Rhona clearly showing how much he loved her. He would never let anything happen to her. But Allison was also sure that no one actually had anything to fear from Cailean, even if he was angry at the moment.

"Brother, if you would listen to me, you would understand that it doesn't have to be this way. You don't have to stay with Hamish and Laird Allan any more than I do. This connection between Malcolm and me opens up a whole new world of possibilities for you, too."

Cailean regarded her calmly. "I like to make my own decisions about what I can do, and you know that. And just to get you up to

speed, Laird Allan is dead. Hamish is the new Laird now. And as far as I know, he's assuming you'll be his wife even more so now that his father is no longer in his way. For weeks I've been doing everything I can to keep him from knowing you're gone. What do you think will happen when he finds out you're here? With his sworn enemy, Rhona! And now me, too. Who do you think he'll take his anger out on?"

Rhona had turned pale when Cailean had spoken of the Laird's death. And once again exchanged a glance with Malcolm.

"Laird Allan is dead?" she now asked.

"Hasn't word arrived here yet?" replied Cailean disparagingly. "Yet your men have just spent several days on the Macleans' land. They don't seem to be that observant."

Malcolm's face darkened.

Rhona folded her arms. "Let Hamish be my worry. He'll understand. And who knows, maybe it will be all right in the end, even for the Macleans."

Cailean stared at his sister. Finally, he shook his head. "How can you be so blind? And how can you get involved with Malcolm Grant? You couldn't have committed a greater stupidity."

Allison wasn't sure, but she thought she heard fear in his voice, even though his words sounded angry.

"And how can you be so stubborn?" exclaimed Rhona. "You don't even know Malcolm. How about you trust me and my judgment for once, too?"

She bent over and caught a ray of sunshine. Something suddenly flashed at her neck. It was the amulet, Allison realized. She stared at it, stunned.

But then, all at once, she heard Cailean say, "Am I your guest or your prisoner, Malcolm?"

Again, he and Rhona exchanged a look. It was almost uncanny how well the two communicated without words as if they had been a couple for many years.

"My guest, of course."

Cailean turned away and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Rhona.

"To get out of here."

"But you can't just leave."

"Don't worry, sis. He may say that I am his guest, but I am sure that I am a guest with limited rights. And that certainly only includes the right to move freely around the castle, not the right to return home. I already know that. But I need time now to think about how to get us out of the mess you've gotten us into."

Before Rhona could even take a breath and answer, he stormed out of the room. Allison stared at the door. For a moment, the room was

silent.

Finally, Rhona asked, "Are you really his wife?"

Allison looked at her and felt the brown eyes, which were a slightly different color than Cailean's, fixed on her questioningly. Malcolm, too, eyed her scrutinizingly. It was as if the two of them had only just noticed her. What could she possibly say? What would help Cailean more, and what would hurt him? She knew only one thing—she would do everything necessary to protect him.

She looked at the amulet on Rhona's slender neck and wished she could talk to her about it. Then they would be able to talk very differently, and it would explain a lot. But she had no time for that. Right now, she had to go after Cailean, and besides, she didn't want Malcolm to hear them talking about the stone and the amulet. But since Rhona was definitely not going to run away, she had time for that later. At least, she hoped so.

She turned toward the door. "I think it's better if I go after him," she said, avoiding the question altogether.

Rhona sighed, "Do that. Maybe you can talk some sense into him." She took a deep breath. "And maybe later you can explain to me why you're wearing my work dress."

Allison started and looked down at herself. She had never questioned where Cailean had found the dress. But if his sister had disappeared, of course, it made sense that he might take one of her dresses. Her eyes fell back to the amulet. "I will. Later."

As Allison was about to head for the door, Malcolm asked, "Is it true that Laird Allan is no longer alive?"

Allison nodded. "Yes."

"Are you sure?"

She thought about seeing the dead man on the floor and what she had felt while performing CPR and feeling the life drain out of him.

"I'm sure. I was there."

Allison stood in the hallway, perplexed. She had good intentions to follow Cailean but had no idea where he had fled to. And she could hardly search the entire castle.

She assumed he wanted to be as far away from Rhona as possible. Somewhere where she wouldn't be able to find him. But where could that be?

She heard someone coming up the stairs and was just wondering what to do when she noticed it was Ian. He was heading straight for her and beckoning. "I'll take you to him," he said curtly.

Astonished, she followed Ian down the stairs. It appeared that they were allies now and no longer guards and prisoners. She liked that.

She hurried to keep up with him as they walked through the Great Hall again, then down two flights through the courtyard a bit, and up another flight of stairs. Ian opened a door, and all at once, wind blew against Allison. Just beyond the door was a battlement walkway that lay deserted in the sun. At the end of the corridor was a small tower with a door leading into it. Ian pointed to that door. "Up there," he said.

Allison couldn't see anyone on the smaller tower, but if Ian said so, it must be true. Besides, this spot was probably the farthest away from Rhona as possible.

"How did you know that?" she asked Ian.

He smiled. "I have a sister, too." Then closed the door behind him.

Allison hurried along the battlements, glancing around the courtyard, which was full of life. The castle seemed to be in good condition. People were well-nourished, there were many animals running around, and she even heard laughter. Life here seemed to be good. And although she had only known Malcolm Grant for a few moments, he seemed a fearsome but calm man. No wonder Rhona was drawn to all this. There was a different atmosphere at Dundarg Castle, as far as she could tell.

She reached the door, opened it, and found a small staircase. It ended at another door, which could almost as easily be described as a

hatch. Allison climbed through and looked around.

Sure enough, up here, leaning against the wall, sat Cailean. He looked at her somewhat ruefully.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have left you alone in there."

Allison shrugged. "That's all right. It's not like your sister and Malcolm are brutes."

He didn't answer that. "Did Ian lead you here?"

She nodded.

"I was hoping he might. I could tell he was following me."

Allison had to smile. "Like you said, we're prisoners with limited rights. That's why they need to keep track of us."

She stepped to the edge of the waist-high wall and gazed into the distance. From here, there was a breathtaking view of the valley and the water of the loch on all sides. The castle was in a perfect location to ward off enemies. She turned to Cailean, who eyed her thoughtfully. "May I join you, or would you rather be alone?"

He shook his head. "I was hoping you'd come."

She went over to him and settled down on the floor next to him, but without touching him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

After a brief silence, he said, "I expected a lot of things, but not this." He took a deep breath. "There's something else I haven't told you."

A warning tingle spread up the back of Allison's neck. Those words always scared her. Silently, she waited for him to continue.

"Just before she died, my grandmother said something to me that I didn't understand. But then you showed up and said your name was Grant. And suddenly, I knew what she meant. But now, though, I realize that I hadn't understood anything after all."

Allison frowned. "I'm not sure I understand."

Cailean looked at her calmly. "She was clairvoyant at times but couldn't quite place what she saw. Just before she died, she called me over and said, *Take her to the Grants. That's where her home is.*" He smiled wistfully. "When you showed up, I was positive it was your arrival she had anticipated and that it was my duty to bring you here."

Allison took a deep breath. "But she meant Rhona."

He nodded. "That's what I'm assuming. Even though I don't like it."

"Is that why you were so complacent when Ian and the others captured us?"

He looked into the distance for a while, then nodded. "Although I was very disappointed that I had to bring you here."

Allison held her breath. "Why?"

He didn't look at her as he said, "Because I knew we wouldn't be able to stay together then." He looked at a bird of prey circling above them. "That's why I tried to savor every moment on the way here."

A wild mix of emotions simultaneously rushed through Allison. There was joy, confusion, a little fear, and so much hope. She knew exactly what he meant and now understood much better why he had occasionally pulled her a little closer to him and why he had furtively buried his face in her hair when he thought she was asleep. He hadn't been intrusive, it had all developed naturally between them and was something that had carried Allison through the past few days. But now, she also knew why he had been so wistful and why his mood had deteriorated as they approached Freuchie Castle.

However, she didn't know how to answer. She was moving much too close to something that could easily become too dangerous for her. She felt as if she was standing on a precipice and could easily take a wrong step. She had to put her feelings behind her now, or she would never get home in one piece. So, she did what she had always done in situations involving feelings. Distract.

"What does it mean for you now that Rhona and Malcolm are together?"

He gave her an inscrutable look, and suddenly she felt like a coward. But he followed her lead with the change of subject and shook his head. "I don't know yet. But I do know there's nothing I can do about it. Rhona always does what she wants. And if she wants to be with him, I'm the last person who will stop her."

Allison smiled. "I think you're actually the only one who could do anything about it. She needs your approval, or she wouldn't have asked you to come here."

He snorted. "Rhona has never needed my approval before."

But Allison remembered the look of despair on his sister's face when Cailean left the room. And basically, he knew it, too.

"What would it mean if they got married? Would it be so bad?"

Cailean glanced at her. "It could mean war. Hamish will never let it stand. He thinks my sister belongs to him."

War. Allison repeated the word over and over in her mind. A feud between clans was like a war and could end in bloodshed and cruelty. But would it really come to a bloody feud between the Macleans and the Grants? And what would it mean for the MacGilvies, who stood directly in between?

Allison remembered a rainy afternoon when she had sat at the dining room table with Caitrin and going over the history of the Macleans. Allison had only looked up one thing when they were talking about the history of the clans. She had Googled whether there had ever been a feud between the Macleans and the Grants. After all, the Grants were her clan, and the stone was on the Macleans' territory. But there had been nothing; she knew that well. On the contrary, the two clans were said to have had a friendly relationship.

And perhaps that friendly relationship had begun with a marriage between a MacGilvie, whose name was attached to Clan Maclean, and a Grant. Rhona and Malcolm.

Thoughtfully, she turned to Cailean. Should she tell him what she knew? But then she would have to explain a lot more, and she wasn't ready to do that yet.

He had noticed her look and looked at her questioningly.

"I think," Allison said slowly, "that whether it comes to a conflict like that is mostly up to you and how you handle the situation."

Cailean looked at her for a long time, and she could see him contemplating that. Then he averted his eyes and watched the bird of prey still circling above them. "It would have been so much easier if she had married Hamish."

"Would it really?"

"Aye, I believe so."

Allison bit her lip. "Even after what you know about him now? Do you really think your sister would have benefited from a marriage like that?"

He crossed his arms. "They still like each other, they're friends. And marriage is mostly about making good connections, not about whether you love each other. You also have to think about what's good for the clan."

Allison wondered if he was only talking about Rhona. Who would Cailean have to marry to build good relationships?

"And what if marrying Malcolm Grant is even better for the clan because you will be able to create a lasting and stable peace between the clans?"

He kept silent and gritted his teeth. Allison gave him time. In her job, she had learned to take a step back and allow time for the right answer instead of shooting the next question right away. And as always, it worked. When he finished thinking, he shook his head. "I can't see it yet, but knowing Rhona, she's already come up with a plan."

Allison had to smile. It was one of the things she liked about him. He allowed women to have their own opinions and respected their intelligence. It was probably a result of having been raised by a strong woman. And that must have been his grandmother, especially if she had been the gatekeeper.

"I'm sure Rhona has a plan in which you also play an important role. Otherwise, she wouldn't have had you brought here."

Cailean sighed. "I just hope it goes well. Hamish is often unpredictable."

Allison smiled. "I know it will be fine."

Cailean raised his head and looked at her questioningly, but

Allison quickly averted her eyes. She had said too much. Fortunately, he didn't ask. That was another thing she appreciated about him, he accepted the boundaries she set.

Cailean rested his head against the wall, let his eyes wander into the distance, and shook his head. "Malcolm Grant as a brother-in-law... I couldn't have imagined that in my wildest dreams."

"I don't find him unpleasant," Allison said, earning a frown that made her laugh.

For a while, they were silent. Then Cailean said, "And what will you do now?"

Allison wrapped her arms around her legs. "I'll talk to your sister as soon as I can. Hopefully, she'll tell me where the stone is and knows how I can get my amulet back. And then I hope to find my way back to Dundarg."

Cailean raised his eyebrows and sat up. He looked alarmed. "You want to go back?"

"I have to go back. That's where the stone is."

After a while, he said, "I really believed that the amulet had something to do with the Grants because what Hamish said was true. My grandmother's mother was a Grant. It all made so much sense. So, why don't you want to stay here?" He sounded honestly confused.

Allison hesitated. "Because this is not my home."

"Where is?"

She lowered her head. "I can't tell you that yet. I need to talk to your sister first."

He made an impatient sound that she could well understand. She gathered all her courage and said, "Trust me."

He gazed at her for a while, then said, "I do."

It seemed as if he wanted to say something else, but he remained silent. Finally, he leaned back and turned his eyes to the sky again. "I need to talk to Rhona, too, but not yet. I don't want to learn that she's right."

Allison had to smile. "You never cease to amaze me," she said softly.

He gave her a quick glance and returned her smile but said nothing more.

Allison straightened up. "I'd like to go talk to your sister about the amulet right now. Or should I wait until you have a chance to talk to her?"

He nodded. "You go ahead, I'll stay here."

She rose and walked over to the stairs, looking at him again as he sat there lost in thought as the wind rippled through his chestnut-colored hair.

She made her way slowly down the stairs. She was anxious to talk

to Rhona, but she would have rather stayed with him. It was so peaceful up here.

She had just reached the door to the battlements when she heard his footsteps behind her. He was running quickly down the stairs and had caught up with her within a few seconds.

"What is it?" she asked in alarm when she saw his serious face.

He stepped to her and hesitantly stopped in front of her. "I am a fool," he said softly.

"Why?" she asked, her stomach suddenly fluttering.

"Because I've been thinking of nothing else but kissing you for days, and now that we're finally alone, I'm about to miss my chance."

His words made her knees so weak that she had to hold on to the door. "You want to kiss me?"

He nodded, his gaze so intense that she could almost feel it physically. He stepped a little closer and was now almost touching her. "I'm almost dying of desire. Do you know what it's like to hold a woman like you for three days?"

Silently, Allison shook her head. But it occurred to her that he didn't know what it was like for her to be held by him for three days either. It fueled an almost painful longing that grew with each passing minute.

He stepped a little closer to her and lowered his head but still didn't touch her. "I don't know when we'll be alone next, and I just realized that I can't let you go without at least trying."

She could already feel his breath on her lips and knew exactly that she had to give him a sign. He respected her boundaries and would never do anything she didn't want. Even now, he was waiting for permission, and Allison found it hard to think. Her body wanted him so much, but she knew it was not a good idea. But after three days of being around him, she couldn't think straight. It was just a kiss, after all. One kiss would do no harm.

Slowly she lifted her mouth towards him.

"May I?" he asked, his gaze searching hers.

Instead of answering, Allison took his shirt and pulled him close. Her lips met his, and it was as if a fire had ignited inside her. And the fire almost overwhelmed her. Suddenly she wanted more, much more.

She opened her lips and gasped when his tongue immediately found hers. It was not a gentle, careful kiss, but from the first moment, it was hot and deep.

He pulled her closer and put his arms around her as their tongues began to explore each other's mouths. His hand went into her hair and untied the blade of grass she had used to tie it back this morning. He reached into her hair and pulled. Allison gasped, pressing against him, wanting more of him. He moaned softly, too, and the fire inside her

spread like wildfire, nearly engulfing her. She stood on her tiptoes, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pressed herself against him. More and more wildly, their tongues danced together, and Allison felt more and more heat building between them.

If this had happened in her time, they would have ended up in bed within a few minutes. But although she could barely think straight, there was one thought that was very present. It was as if a neon sign was emblazoned in her mind. She couldn't have sex with him. It wouldn't end well. But a kiss did no harm. It was only a kiss, after all. And a damn good one.

But then his movements slowed down, he withdrew his tongue, kissed her gently on the lips, and finally, he just held her. His forehead rested against hers. Allison was breathing as hard as if she had just run a long distance. She had never experienced a kiss like this before, she had never felt anything like this before. Especially not on a first kiss. The feeling made her dizzy, and she held on to him.

He was also breathing heavily, and his fingers were still playing with her hair. There was the same surprise in his eyes that Allison felt. But what did he expect now? Would he want more? And what was she supposed to do then?

Unsure, she released her hands from his neck. "Thank you for trying," she said, her voice sounding hoarse.

He smiled. "It was an honor."

Now Allison had to smile, too, but there was still something she had to say. She searched for the right words. "That was nice, but I can only kiss you. That's all."

It was hard for her to say these words, but it was the right thing to do. Sex would make everything too complicated, of that she was sure.

His smile faded, and he eyed her seriously. "You must never think that just because you let me kiss you, I would expect you to."

Allison took a deep breath. Oh God, he was so honorable.

He added, "You don't have to be afraid of me. Ever."

"I never would be."

And she knew it was true. She was more afraid of herself and of the fire his kiss had ignited. She had never experienced anything like it, and even if he managed not to cross the boundaries she had set, she wasn't sure she would be able to stick to the same rules.

Now he smiled again. "And maybe I'll get lucky, and you'll kiss me again someday."

Allison began to tremble at the very idea. He seemed to misinterpret her reaction because he gently stroked her cheek. "Don't worry, I would never take advantage of you."

That wasn't actually the problem, Allison noted. On the contrary, her body wanted him to take advantage of her. But she couldn't let

that happen and shouldn't tell him that.

She managed a weak smile. "I'd best be going now."

Concerned, he looked at her. "I couldn't bear it if you were afraid of me."

Allison knew she had sent him the wrong signals. He had no idea the battle she was fighting inside. And he didn't deserve that, not after behaving so honorably. Many other men probably would have taken advantage of the situation.

She reached for his hand, stood on tiptoe, and kissed him on the cheek. "I could never be afraid of you." She felt him relax. And then she didn't know what devil was riding her when she said, "I'm more afraid of myself because I thought it was far too beautiful."

Before he could react, she turned, slipped through the door, and hurried down the battlements, her cheeks burning. Why couldn't she hold her tongue? She was getting herself into hot water.

*A*s Allison found her way to the Great Hall searching for someone

to take her to Rhona, she wondered if talking to Cailean's sister now was actually the best idea. She had the feeling that everyone could read on her face what had just happened. She still felt Cailean's lips on hers and his hands in her hair. And it caused such a desire in her that she was almost ashamed.

She had to go home, and as quickly as possible. It wouldn't help to throw herself into an affair that would never end well.

Although Rhona was the key to her traveling home, she felt uncomfortable talking to her. She was Cailean's sister and was a woman who probably looked at the world as intently as he did. At least, that was the impression she had given earlier. Surely, she would see immediately that something had happened between them.

A figure rose from one of the tables. It was Ian, walking toward her. "Can I help you?"

Allison took a deep breath. Coward, she scolded herself. It had only been a kiss, and Rhona could hardly object to that—she, who had run off with the archenemy of her clan.

"I'd like to go..." She hesitated. What was the best way to address someone in Rhona's position? "I'd like to speak to Rhona MacGilvie."

Ian shook his head. "She's been in seclusion for a while. It would be better to talk to her tonight."

Disappointment and relief spread equally through Allison.

Ian bowed. "But she said to show you to your room so you can freshen up after your long ride. One of the maids will prepare a bath for you."

"How thoughtful," Allison said and noticed that Ian also didn't quite know what to call Rhona either. Apparently, She and Malcolm weren't married yet, so she wasn't yet the Lady of Freuchie Castle.

Ian turned and beckoned an older, chubby woman over. "Anne, this is Allison MacGilvie. Please see that she gets everything she needs."

The name caused a twinge in Allison's stomach. She couldn't forget

that everyone here still thought she and Cailean were married.

The woman eyed her attentively, but not unkindly, and curtsied. "Come, my lady, I will take you to your room. The water is already being heated. It won't be long now."

At the thought of hot water and cleanliness, Allison sighed comfortably. She knew very well that this was an absolute luxury at this time, and it was only being granted to her because it was important to Rhona and Malcolm that Cailean, and thus also she as a surprise guest, felt comfortable here.

She followed Anne into a part of the castle where she had not been before and where the guest rooms appeared to be. The maid didn't speak, so Allison had plenty of time to look around and memorize the way. She was lost in her own thoughts, which were, of course, mainly about Cailean.

Only now did it occur to her that they hadn't even talked about whether they should continue pretending to be married. His sister didn't really believe them anyway. But how else was Cailean going to explain who she was and why he had brought her? Even though Allison wasn't that knowledgeable about the period, she knew it certainly wasn't very honorable for him to spend so much time alone with a woman who wasn't his wife or, at the least, his betrothed. She didn't care about the light it shed on her. After all, she'd be leaving soon, and she didn't need to protect her reputation. But what about his?

She resolved to talk to him about it later.

Finally, Anne led her to a cozy room in one of the towers, with a bathtub on the right-side wall. A standing screen stood ready to protect the bather from view. On the other side of the room was a bed, and, despite the summer weather, a fire had been lit. But it was actually a bit cool in this room.

Anne followed her gaze to the fire. "Because of its location on the north side, this room is always cold. I thought a fire wouldn't be bad so you won't catch a cold. But I can also put it out if you get too warm. It does keep the water warmer longer, though."

Allison quickly shook her head. She wasn't too cold at the moment, but after two weeks in a dungeon with only two blankets to protect her and then three nights out in the woods and on horseback, she didn't think she could get enough heat. As far as she was concerned, Anne could turn this room into a sauna.

Behind them, the door opened, and two younger maids came in, each carrying two large buckets of steaming water. They were sweating with exertion as they poured the water into the tub.

Then they were gone again, and Allison ventured a peek into the bathtub. It was only big enough to sit down in, not lying down, so

with four buckets, it was already almost a third full. Allison now realized just how accommodatingly she was being treated. Rhona and Malcolm seemed to really care that Cailean was comfortable here. Or was that how they treated all guests during this era?

Anne pointed to a pile of bath linens and then held up a bar of soap with pressed dried flowers. "You can wash yourself with this. Let me know if you need help."

Allison nodded, but the thought of a servant washing her was too much for her. She would do that herself.

The maids returned and poured the buckets into the tub. The water was steaming so much Allison wondered if it was boiling when the young women filled their buckets. Surely it was dangerous for them to haul buckets of nearly boiling water halfway across the castle. She wondered how often someone got scalded. Suddenly she felt guilty that they were doing this for her.

Anne propped up the screen and pointed to the chair behind it. "Would you like me to help you undress? It seems like your dress doesn't have many laces."

Allison realized that she was wearing a dress that made her look more like a maid. It was, as Rhona had said, her old work dress. But then, that's exactly what Cailean had intended, that she would not be recognized as a lady or whatever she was.

"Thanks, I can handle it myself," Allison said, stepping over to the chair.

"If you tell me where to find your clothes, I can place the new ones on the bed for you," she heard Anne's voice.

Allison looked down. This dress was so dirty after the three weeks she had already spent in it and the ride here that it could almost be called rags. But she had nothing else. "I'll put this one back on later," she said, "thanks."

She could hear Anne's gasp, but she didn't reply. And suddenly, Allison felt ashamed. How was she supposed to meet Rhona wearing such a dirty and smelly dress? And Rhona's old one at that.

The maids with the buckets returned and poured more bathwater. Then they curtsied to Anne. "We've finished."

Anne pointed to the door. "Return to the kitchen. And tell Finlay to heat some new water."

"He already has," the red-haired maid replied, and the two slipped out the door.

Anne closed it behind them and said, "Now get in the water already before it cools down."

Quickly Allison undressed. She was still wearing the undergarment Cailean had brought her; presumably, it was also Rhona's and her underpants, the only remaining piece from modern time. It was almost

strange to feel the elastic band that proved this piece of fabric had been made in another time.

For a moment, Allison became pensive. She knew that Rhona was the key to finding the gate because if her grandmother had been the gatekeeper and had known she was dying, she would certainly have made Rhona or another woman the gatekeeper. So, it was only a matter of time before she had all the comforts of her own life again. At least, that's what she hoped.

She hid her panties in the folds of her dress so Anne wouldn't see them and carefully got into the tub. Although it had been steaming earlier, it had cooled down considerably and was just warm enough for a bath. Allison slid into the water up to her neck, and after a moment's hesitation, submerged her head as well. She was already starting to feel cleaner.

She ran her fingers through her hair, rubbing her face, arms, and legs, and was really looking forward to using the soap. She had never had any idea that warm water could be so delightful.

Anne moved back and forth in the room, adding wood to the fire and straightening the pillows.

There was a knock at the door, and even though the bathtub was shielded by the screen, Allison slipped deeper into the water. She heard Anne open the door. "What do you want?" the latter asked. "The lady's taking a bath."

A young woman's voice rang out. "The fire in the kitchen won't start right, and Finlay can't find the long spit, and the other one is too short for the roast. Also, there aren't enough onions left, and Maude asks if she can use the leftover butter. Finlay says no, but Maude says she needs it. They're yelling at each other. I think you should come."

Allison had to grin. That sounded like a bigger mess. Apparently, human nature was the same here as in her day.

"I can't. I have to help the lady."

"But they're screaming really loud, and if the roast doesn't get on the fire soon, it's not going to cook in time for tonight."

"I can't," Anne said, but Allison called out, "I'll be fine on my own, Anne, go ahead."

"Are you sure?" The maid's round face peeked around on the side of the screen.

Allison nodded. "I'll be fine. And I don't want to be the one to blame if there's no food tonight."

Anne couldn't suppress a smile. "Only Maude and Finlay are to blame for that, no one else. But I'll go then and have a quick look. Latch the door when I'm out."

"I'll do that."

Anne came over and reached for her dress. "I'll put this in the wash

for now."

"No," Allison exclaimed. After all, those were all she had.

But Anne shook her head. "How would it look if I let you arrive at dinner in that dress? Then bathing would have been useless too. I'll find something suitable for you."

Before Allison could say anything else, Anne had disappeared again. "Stop," she shouted, rising from the water. She had to at least get her panties back. But Anne didn't answer, and the door closed behind her.

But a second later, it immediately opened again.

"I have a new shirt ready on the bed, my lord," she heard Anne's voice again. Allison froze. "When your wife is ready, you can use the water. It is still warm, just poured. And I've lit a fire so your wife won't catch a cold. I hope I did the right thing."

Allison looked over the screen and could only just make out a shock of auburn hair pushing, or rather being pushed, into the room.

"I'll be right back with a dress for milady," Anne was still saying. "But she's still going to bathe for a moment anyway. As I said, you'll be glad to take the water afterwards. It's still warm."

Then she closed the door behind her.

Filled with horror, Allison tensed and slid back under the water, clutching at her knees. Cailean was here in the room with her, and she was naked. This was not good. This was not good at all.

For a while, there was silence, and only the crackling of logs in the fire and the water dripping from Allison's hair could be heard.

"Allison?" she suddenly heard his voice. He sounded just as uncertain as she felt.

"Yes?" she replied.

He didn't answer right away, and she could hear him shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. "I guess I really shouldn't be here."

She bit her lip so hard it hurt. "No," she said slowly. Rarely had she been so aware of her nakedness, even though he couldn't see her at all. But she could physically feel his presence.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice rough. "I didn't know they would put us in the same room."

Allison pulled her legs a little closer to her body. "They still think we're husband and wife."

She heard him take a deep breath. "That's right. I..." He broke off. "Do you want me to leave?"

Allison wrestled with herself like never before in her life. Her body wanted him so badly, but her head told her it was not a good idea. Absolutely not. And then there was her heart, somewhere in between, going from side to side like a traitor.

When she didn't answer, he said, "I really should go." But he did

not move.

"No." The word escaped Allison's lips before she could even think about it.

"Allison," he said, sounding almost desperate.

"What is it?" she asked, even though she knew exactly what he meant and how he felt. His voice resonated with the same turmoil that raged inside her.

"I promised you just an hour ago that I wouldn't take advantage of you, and if I stay, I'm not sure I can keep that promise."

A shiver ran down her spine. She should tell him to leave. But she could not.

"Allison?" he asked again.

All of a sudden, she had made her decision. It was no use, the attraction was too great, and she wouldn't be able to keep avoiding him. It would tear her up to be near him and constantly be thinking about whether she should give in to her lust for him. Because that was what it was, pure physical lust. Nothing more.

"Come here," she said, disengaging her arms from her legs and trying to sit more comfortably.

It was quiet for a while, and she listened breathlessly. She could almost hear him struggling with himself. She had already been through this struggle and was waiting for him to find his way to the other side. And then, finally, she heard him push the latch forward and slowly walk toward the screen. It was only a few steps, but it seemed like an eternity to her. Her heart was pounding almost to bursting, and she couldn't remember ever being so nervous in her life. She slipped deeper into the water.

He finally stepped around the screen, and her heart leapt. Once again, she was struck by how handsome he was. So tall, so masculine, and yet so gentle. His teeth were clenched and she could see the muscles on his jaw flexing, and his breathing was faster.

When their eyes met, his eyes widened in surprise. "You're naked," he slipped out.

Allison pulled her legs back up and wrapped her arms around them. "I... Don't you bathe naked during this era?"

He frowned and stared at her. Then he raised his hands helplessly. "Men do, but I thought women might leave their undergarments on." He blinked. "Apparently not." Then he braced his hands at his sides, lowered his head, and took a deep breath.

"What is it?" asked Allison in alarm. Didn't he like what he saw? She pulled her legs in tightly.

"I'm not sure I can," he said without looking at her.

"Not sure if you can what?" Never in her life had she felt so vulnerable.

He was studying his feet now. "Kissing you when you're naked."

"Oh," she said. So, he was actually keeping to the boundary she had set earlier.

Something inside her melted away. She knew she could trust him completely. Whatever happened was good.

She held out her hand. "Come here."

He raised his eyes but hesitated. She smiled, even if the smile was a little shaky with excitement. "I need someone to wash my hair."

"You want me to wash your hair?" he asked hoarsely.

He sounded so incredulous that some of Allison's confidence crumbled. Maybe that hadn't been a good idea after all.

"Unless you don't want to."

"I do," he said softly.

Cailean stepped behind her at the hot tub, and Allison was aware that he now had the best view of her. Not wanting to seem uptight, she stretched her legs out a little and leaned back. Her heart was pounding so loudly she thought he could probably hear it. He swallowed, and she hoped he liked what he saw.

He knelt behind the tub and reached past her to the soap lying on the washcloths. He was so close to her that she could feel his breath. Slowly, he dipped the soap into the water beside her then rubbed it in his hands. Each of his movements fueled the longing inside her a little more, yet he hadn't even touched her yet.

She bent her head back and dipped her hair into the water to get it really wet. Overhead, she caught his gaze wandering over her, full of admiration. She relaxed further and was about to lift her head when he said, "Stay like that."

He reached into the water and grabbed her hair, which had spread in the water like a fan. For a moment, she enjoyed his hands in her hair, then she lifted her head out of the water and laid it on the edge of the tub. They didn't take their eyes off each other for even a second.

His hands rested on her shoulders for a brief moment, then tentatively moved down to her breasts. When his thumbs grazed her nipples, she gasped. His expression turned concerned, and he withdrew his hands. Allison had to smile. He was so different from all the men she knew.

"Kiss me," she said softly.

He moved a little to the side of the tub and said, "Lift your head for a second."

Confused, Allison lifted her head, and he slid his forearm underneath. Now she was no longer lying on the hard wooden edge but was comfortably cradled in his arm.

He lowered his face close to hers. "You are so beautiful."

His voice was full of admiration, and Allison feasted on it. She

raised her hand and pulled his head even more toward her. For the second time that day, their lips met. This time the kiss was more tender but deeper. The intensity of the sensations hit Allison with such force that she gasped. She opened her lips, and he penetrated her with his tongue.

First, his hand was on her cheek, then he stroked her ear, her hair, and finally her neck. She then dove under the water, and he went down the side of her body to her belly.

Allison groaned, reaching into his hair and pulling herself closer to him. She wanted to feel his hands all over her. "Touch me," she whispered between kisses.

Breathing heavily, he paused. "Allison," he said softly.

"Please," she whispered, wanting to kiss him again.

"We're not allowed to do that."

"I want you, though."

He groaned softly and closed his eyes. Then he shook his head. "We can't risk you getting pregnant."

Dazed, Allison paused. "What?"

He raised his hand to her cheek again and looked at her. "I want you so much, but I don't want you to get pregnant."

Allison closed her eyes and thought about the pill, which she had taken for years. She had never worried about getting pregnant since most of the time, she also used a condom for contraception. But she didn't have a condom, nor had she taken the pill during these past few weeks. He was right, but she didn't want him to be right.

"Damn," she muttered, not realizing until a second later that she was speaking English.

She opened her eyes, and his face was right next to hers. She would have liked to ask him if maybe they should just risk it, but she knew that she would put him in too difficult a situation. She could see the desire in his eyes and could tell he was struggling to hold back. But he was also a gentleman, and after his lust was satisfied, he would feel ashamed. Yet she wanted him so badly it physically hurt. Just kissing would not be enough.

Fortunately, there were other options.

"And what if we just get pleasure this way?" she asked, feeling her cheeks grow hot. She felt like a teenager who wanted sex so badly but didn't know how to bring it up.

He changed his sitting position a little. It took quite a while before he answered. "What do you mean?"

Astonished, she looked at him and tried to figure out if he was joking. But he looked confused and almost a little ashamed. She searched for the right words. "We could just use our hands."

She could see from his frown that he still didn't understand, and

she wondered if sex worked differently during this time period. But that couldn't be. Maybe they simply didn't talk about it so openly.

Another thought occurred to her, and she asked cautiously, "You've done this before, right?"

His eyes snapped open. "You mean lying with a woman?"

That's not exactly what she meant, but she nodded and waited anxiously for the answer.

"Yes," he said.

Well, that was something, at least. Then he had certainly used his hands or his mouth. Or did teenagers have sex differently here than in her time? She would have to explain it carefully to him. And she had to admit that she found him charming in his embarrassment.

She took a deep breath. "And then did she climax when you..." oh God, it was so hard to find the right words, "when you were inside her?"

He didn't answer right away, and she could see him struggling with himself. His ears glowed as he said, "I didn't know women could do that."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Of course they can."

Interest stirred in his gaze. "Really?" He thought for a moment. "Does it feel the same?"

Allison couldn't suppress a smile. "I don't know how men feel it, but I think it's pretty nice."

Fascinated, he looked at her. "That means you've been..." his ears reddened even more, "you know..."

"Often," she answered. But right when she said that she realized might be giving the impression that she had sex with men all the time, yet she wasn't even married. It was probably true, though, compared to the women from this time. My goodness, it was complicated. So, she added, "You can do it yourself as a woman."

He nodded slowly, with understanding. At least men were doing it during this time period too.

Cailean hesitated for a small moment, then asked, "And you want me to do this for you? With your hand?"

He seemed more curious than embarrassed, and suddenly Allison realized she was taking on a role she had never found herself in before. She was the teacher, and she seemed to have a very eager student. She nodded slowly, "You for me and me for you. That way we won't run the risk of me getting pregnant."

He was still processing this new information and nodded. "Show me what to do."

She almost had to smile. He was indeed an eager student and sounded like he wanted an instruction manual. Well, she could give that to him. When else did a woman ever have the opportunity to

teach a man something like this?

Allison wanted to stand up and climb out of the tub, but when she saw his dismayed expression, she paused. "What's wrong?"

"Can you stay in the water while doing this, or won't it work?"

Confused, she lowered herself back into the tub. "Sure, but then I won't be able to touch you at the same time."

"That doesn't matter," he hastened to say. His hand stroked her arm. "You just feel so good underwater."

Allison enjoyed the feeling as his index finger ran over her forearm and then traveled back down her side. She pulled him close and kissed him. Something had changed between them. The kiss was more playful, more familiar, and she wondered if it was because they had been so open with each other.

"What should I do now?" He didn't seem to be able to wait at all.

"Keep kissing me."

And then Allison took his hand and slowly guided it to her breasts. She took his thumb and rubbed it over her nipples, which had already erected. As soon as she let go of him, he continued the movement while his tongue continued to play with hers.

Allison moaned out because by now, her lust was so great that this small touch was enough to ignite a conflagration inside her.

Without any guidance from her, his hand moved to her other breast. He rubbed and pinched a little, and Allison fought down the urge to come right away. She wanted to savor this a little longer. But she wouldn't last long, she knew that already. That's why she took his hand and guided it over her belly between her legs. Carefully he put his big hand on her mound, and at her signal, he rubbed gently. Allison moaned.

She took his thumb, opened her legs a little, and guided his finger to her clit. "Here," she whispered, "just this one spot."

When he gently massaged this point of greatest pleasure with his thumb, Allison had to break the kiss. All her lust seemed to gather between her legs. She clung to his neck and began to move her hips in the same rhythm as his hand. He learned quickly and picked up this movement.

His breathing was getting more panting, too, and Allison would have given anything for him to just take her right now. She tried to concentrate, but it was hard for her.

"Your finger..." she gasped, "move it in."

Carefully his fingers sought the way between her labia, and then he slid into her.

"Deeper," Allison urged, thrusting her hips toward him.

Hesitantly, he pushed his fingers deeper inside. It was a delicious feeling, and Allison closed her eyes.

"Move it in and out."

He did everything she said, and Allison felt more and more tension building up inside her. She wouldn't be able to hold back her orgasm much longer, and she didn't want to.

She laid her head on his shoulder with her eyes closed and just felt. She vaguely perceived that he held her in his arms and pulled her tightly against him. His mouth was almost at her ear, and his breath, which came intermittently and showed her how aroused he was too, increased her lust almost immeasurably.

She put her hand on his again, and he paused in the movement. "Don't stop," Allison groaned out. "Just put your thumb right here." She guided his fingers to her pleasure spot.

He did exactly what she asked, then resumed the movement. And Allison let go, she couldn't hold it any longer. She was no longer aware of anything except his hand in and on her. She clung to him as she climbed higher and higher. She heard her own gasps and felt her body tighten more and more.

Then finally, she climaxed, and release exploded inside her. She moaned and felt herself tighten, pulsating around his fingers.

He must have understood that he should stop because suddenly he held his hand very still but continued to stay inside. Allison felt as if she had been blown into a thousand pieces and blown up like a firework. Very slowly, she returned to earth.

"Hold me," she whispered, though he already was.

He released his hand from her and wrapped both arms around her. She lay heavily in his arms and felt the pleasant warmth spreading through her. She did not know if she had ever experienced such a violent orgasm that had released such incredible energy. Yet, he had only used his hand.

Very briefly, the thought came to her, how it might be if she had real sex with this man. Would it be even better?

When she could slowly think again, she moved her head to look at him. "Is everything all right?" she asked, seeing the incredulous look on his face.

He looked at her questioningly. "I didn't know such a thing was possible," he said. "Does that happen every time for you?"

Allison smiled. "When someone does everything right, like you just did, yes." Seeing the frown, she added, "You were amazing."

"But I didn't do much at all," he said almost helplessly.

Allison almost had to laugh and just barely held back. "You let me lead you, and you paid attention to exactly what I wanted and needed right now. That was a lot."

More than all the men she had ever been in bed with combined.

She hesitated. "Did you like it, too?"

Suddenly she was no longer the teacher but the vulnerable woman.

His eyes grew wide. "Like it? I almost came, too. Is that normal?"

Instead of answering, Allison pulled him close and kissed him gently. This man had no idea how great he was. She let the kiss slowly intensify, then broke away from him and said, "Then we should take care of you now."

He smiled weakly. "I'm afraid we don't have time for that."

She leaned forward and bit his lower lip lightly, teasing him. "Why not? I want you to come too."

He laughed softly and kissed her gently, but without responding to her teasing tongue. "Don't worry about me. I've never experienced anything more beautiful than today."

"But...", Allison put in, trying to fight down her disappointment along with her already reawakening lust.

He shook his head. "Someone has already knocked twice. I think we need to get ready for dinner."

Allison sat up. "Someone knocked? When?"

Cailean grinned. "Exactly."

"It can't be. I didn't hear anything."

His grin turned mischievous. "I'm afraid you were too busy with something else."

Allison felt her cheeks grow hot, but then she shrugged. She had indeed been in another world. "That just proves how well you were doing."

Cailean laughed. He was about to reply when there was another knock. "I don't think we can ignore it again," he whispered and stood up. His shirt was wet and stuck to his body. Although her lust had just been satisfied, Allison couldn't get enough of him and felt a desire to see him completely naked. What would that look like?

"Yes?" he asked at the door.

"My lord, your sister asks when my lady Allison is coming to see her. She is expecting her."

It was Anne.

Allison sat up and pushed all thoughts of a naked Cailean aside.

He turned and looked at her questioningly. She nodded. "I'll be right there."

She heard the double meaning of these words herself and was happy like a teenager.

"Tell my sister that my wife will join her in a moment."

"Very well, my lord. I will wait here in the hall. Or do you need my help?"

Cailean smiled. "No, thanks. We'll be fine."

"I also have another dress for my lady. I'll leave it here and let your sister know."

Allison closed her eyes. They had only a few moments before Anne would take up her post outside, and Rhona was expecting her as well. She realized they couldn't go on. Yet, she would so gladly have given back to Cailean what he had just given her. But there was no point in wishing they had more time.

She rose from the bathtub and reached for one of the towels. She tied the first one around her hair and dried herself with the second one. Then she got out of the tub. She was about to wrap the towel around herself when she looked up and noticed Cailean's gaze on her naked body. She smiled. After all, they had just done, she was no longer ashamed and even enjoyed his look, knowing he desired her. She could see that on his face as well. Tonight, they would continue where they had just left off, and if she was honest, just the thought of that gave her pleasure.

She walked to the door and leaned close to him. "I'm looking forward to tonight."

He raised his eyebrows. "What about tonight?" he asked with careful composure.

"Tonight," she said, standing on her tiptoes and giving him a little kiss on the mouth, "we'll do it again."

"Repeat? Didn't you say it would be my turn?"

Allison raised her arm, stroking the front of his kilt as if at random. Oh, even though he was playing it cool, she could feel how aroused he was. "Could be your turn, too," she whispered, "but I definitely want to feel your fingers inside me again." She smiled sweetly. "And maybe your tongue, too." Then she kissed him on the cheek, delighting in his incredulous look. She was sure he wished now, too, that they didn't have to go to dinner.

He closed his eyes and groaned softly. "You're killing me, Allison," he said.

She gave him a smile and was about to open the latch when he put a hand on hers. "And what do you think you're doing?"

"I want to get the dress."

He shook his head. "But not like that." He pointed to the towel she had wrapped around herself. "I'll do that."

Allison realized that maybe in her London apartment, she could venture onto the street like this to bring in a package, but here things were different, even if no one saw her. She stepped back and nodded. "All right, then."

A few moments later, he brought in the basket with a neatly folded dress, undergarment, and hair ribbon. Allison went behind the screen and slipped into the undergarment and dress. She didn't feel shy with him, but if he watched her while she was dressing, she knew she would try to seduce him again. It was just so nice with him.

The dress was dark blue and looked great on her. Fortunately, it laced it in the front and not in the back, so she could manage without his help. When she finished, she tied her still-damp hair in a demure braid that was a bit askew because she hadn't done it in so long. Normally she wore a simple ponytail, it left the nape of her neck so nicely exposed. But that was probably not quite appropriate here.

When she stepped out from behind the screen, he was still leaning against the wall next to the door, facing her. Admiration in his eyes. "Are you sure you want to talk to my sister now?"

Allison frowned. "Why wouldn't I?"

Cailean grinned. "Because I couldn't bear it if we get under her skin right now. Not after what just happened." He pointed to the hot tub.

Allison felt the blood rush to her cheeks. Then she shrugged. "Maybe I'd feel the same way if I had to speak with my brother right now, but luckily it's your sister."

He looked at her with interest. "You have a brother?"

She nodded. "Two, actually."

He seemed to want to ask something else, but then they heard a throat clearing in the hallway.

"I think I have to go." She hesitated. "Any recommendation on how I should handle her?"

He smiled. "Never underestimate her. She looks harmless, but she's not."

Allison returned his smile. "Don't worry, I won't. Do you want me to pass anything along for you?"

Cailean tensed a tiny bit and shook his head. "I'll talk to her when I'm ready. She understands that."

Allison knew better than to come between the siblings. She took a deep breath and put a hand on the latch. "Will you be here when I get back?"

With one step, he was with her and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her long and intensely. "I can't wait," he whispered. "Hurry."

Allison broke away from him and stepped into the hallway where Anne was waiting for her. She, too, could hardly wait, and that was not good at all.

A short time later, she was standing in front of a door, and Anne was announcing Allison. Suddenly she was just as nervous as before an exam at school. Her hands were sweaty, and her heart was racing. And she realized that it wasn't just about the stone and the amulet, but whether Cailean's sister, whose opinion he seemed to value, would accept her. It was so silly because soon, she would hopefully start her journey home and leave all this behind.

Anne motioned for her to step into the room. Rhona sat by the window, her hair glowing dark red in the sun. She rose as Allison entered. Her gaze wasn't unfriendly but rather curious, but she wasn't beaming at Allison either. At least she wasn't hostile, which was something.

Hastily, Allison wondered if she should curtsy or how else to greet another woman at this time. She didn't know, so she settled for a nod and a smile.

Anne said goodbye, and then they were alone. For a moment, they just stood there, eyeing each other. Allison hadn't had many real relationships in her life, and only once had she been introduced to a boyfriend's family. That had actually felt about the same as this. Then too, the women of the family, in particular, had eyed her curiously and dismissively. At the time, Allison had reacted defiantly because she found it unacceptable to be judged simply because she was dating someone. Today, she could understand it better because when Jenna had gotten together with Evan, she had been just as critical of him, wanting to know if he was good enough for her. So, she let Rhona scrutinize her. Finally, she nodded and pointed to the seat across from her in the window alcove. "Would you like to sit down?"

Allison nodded. "Thank you."

"Can I offer you something to drink?"

Rhona pointed to a pitcher with two mugs that were ready. So that, too, had not changed over the centuries.

Allison accepted gratefully and sipped the now familiar bitter ale.

Rhona sat bolt upright and eyed Allison. "I heard you wanted to

see me. That's fortunate because I want to talk to you, too, before I meet with my brother."

Allison raised her eyebrows. This was unexpected. She kept silent, hoping Rhona would keep talking. Allison always felt more comfortable with waiting tactics in a conversation.

Rhona waited a brief moment for her response and then continued speaking. "Your appearance here was surprising, to say the least. Therefore, I think you will forgive me if I have some questions."

Allison shifted restlessly on her pillow. She remembered that she still hadn't talked to Cailean about whether they should keep pretending to be husband and wife. Now she had to improvise—or distract. Allison decided on the latter and said, "I got the impression that Cailean was also very surprised when he found you here at Malcolm Grant's."

The auburn eyebrows shot up. "I think that's between my brother and me."

Allison bowed her head. So, Rhona was direct, that was good to know. She was just contemplating an answer when Cailean's sister beat her to it.

"Since I have never heard of a woman in my brother's life and would certainly have heard if he had married, I have one question above all. Who are you? And why did you come here with him?"

Allison refrained from telling her that those were actually two questions. But she also knew she couldn't fool Rhona. She was just as perceptive as Cailean. She sighed, clasped her hands together, and mustered all her courage. "That I found my way to Freuchie Castle is rather a coincidence, and that I met you here is an even greater one. Truthfully, I was actually looking for you."

Rhona frowned, and Allison had to admit that she was speaking far too covertly.

"I was looking for the amulet, that's why Cailean brought me."

Allison pointed to her neck, and immediately Rhona grabbed hers. She twirled the amulet in her fingers. The sun reflected in it, and light danced on the walls of the room.

"Why were you searching for the amulet?" asked Rhona, looking at Allison with a completely different look. She was now curious. Allison could see that.

She bit her lip. "Because I came through the gate, and I want to go back. But I don't have my amulet anymore, and I knew from Cailean that you wore one. Just like your grandmother did."

Rhona sat up straighter and suddenly on high alert.

Allison leaned forward and looked pleadingly at her counterpart. "I need your help, Rhona. I can't find the stone, but I need to return home."

"You're one of the women?" asked Rhona incredulously. Allison noticed that she had switched to the confidential form of address. That was good because it meant she felt connected to her.

Allison nodded. "And I need your help."

Rhona stared at her. "I don't know if I can help you."

Her heart sank. "But you wear the amulet, and your grandmother was the gatekeeper, right?"

Rhona bit her lip and nodded. "She was."

"And now you are?" asked Allison cautiously.

Cailean's sister nodded again, then shook her head, and finally, she raised her shoulders almost unhappily. "I don't know."

Allison tried to remain calm. "Why don't you know?"

Rhona ran both hands over her face. "A few years ago, my grandmother let me in on the secret. She knew she was going to die soon and needed someone to guard the stone when she went. It was only natural that she chose me to do it. Even as a child, I met the women who came through the gate, but I never knew what it meant. Grandmother always told us they were relatives, but I never really believed it. They were much too strange for that. But when she explained it to me, suddenly it all made sense."

She looked out the window, and her gaze had transfigured. Allison remembered Cailean telling her about the same story. "And then?" she asked.

Rhona pressed her lips together. "If you've traveled, then you know that you need the stone for that. But it's at Dundarg now. That means, as gatekeeper, I need to be there too."

All at once, Allison recognized Rhona's anguish. She had taken over the job of gatekeeper from her grandmother, but she couldn't fulfill that promise because she was now living at Freuchie Castle.

"Isn't there someone else who could fill that role?" she asked cautiously.

Rhona raised her shoulders. "No, I don't think anyone else knows. The only one I could think of is Ila, but she's still too young. I do think she can also feel it, though."

Allison frowned. She vaguely remembered the young girl who had spoken for her. "Is that Hamish's sister?" she asked.

Surprised, Rhona looked at her. "You know her?"

"No, I don't really know her," Allison explained, wondering how much she should tell Rhona about what had happened at Dundarg Castle. But first, she needed more information. "Do you know how to travel?" she asked.

Rhona shook her head. "I've only met one woman so far who could do it. She came two years ago. She told me how it feels, but I don't feel anything there."

"Be glad," Allison muttered.

Attentively, Rhona looked at her. "Does that mean you're not here by choice?"

Allison straightened her shoulders. "I am, but I want to return home. It's not for me. I belong in my own time."

Rhona exhaled sounded somehow relieved. "And you need my help to get back?"

Allison nodded. "I couldn't find the stone, and now I don't have my amulet either." She hesitated. "Has a messenger perhaps arrived here recently and dropped off an amulet?"

Rhona frowned. "No, why would anyone do that?"

"Hmmm," Allison said vaguely, but her stomach tightened. Either Malcolm had the package but hadn't told Rhona about it, or Hamish hadn't sent the messenger. It was too complicated to tell Rhona what Hamish and the Laird's death had to do with it.

All of a sudden, Rhona reached for her hand. "I'm so sorry I wasn't there when you arrived. No one has arrived here for two years, and I didn't think anyone would appear right while I was away. And I made that promise to my grandmother."

Allison waved it off. "It's okay, I've found you now."

She made it sound easier than it had been. Truthfully, if Rhona had stayed where the gatekeeper belonged, Allison probably wouldn't have ended up in the dungeon and would have been home long ago. But she didn't want to tell her that. Instead, she asked, "But what's your plan for the stone? I assume you're going to stay here?"

Rhona bit her lip. "Actually, I wanted to clear things up between the clans first and then let Cailean in on the matter of the stone and look for a solution with him. You know, he used to see those women too. I've heard that men also know about the stone, though there are far fewer than women."

Allison frowned. "You want Cailean to be the gatekeeper?"

Rhona shook her head. "Oh no, he could never do that. He's always gone."

"Where to?" asked Allison, though it didn't matter at all, she was naturally curious when given any kind of information.

"He arranges many things for Hamish and is often out and about in the Macleans' territory. But he also mediates between the clans and even travels to London sometimes. He completed his studies in France."

She sounded proud, and Allison could relate. Even in modern times, there were many people who couldn't travel much, but here, it was certainly as rare as snow in summer. It also explained why Cailean could read people so well, seemed to have diplomatic skills, and was so open to new things.

"Then I was lucky he was there when I arrived," Allison said lightly.

Rhona regarded her thoughtfully. "What do you mean?"

She thought about how to answer, but since Rhona knew her story and was actually the gatekeeper, she decided to confide in her.

"I wasn't very well prepared when I arrived and got into trouble right away. Cailean came to my defense because he recognized the amulet. And when Malcolm's men came for him, he brought me along because he was afraid something would happen to me if I stayed behind."

Rhona frowned. "So you're not married, then?"

The question hung heavy in the room, and Allison knew she had to answer quickly. Rhona deserved the truth, and Allison knew she'd probably get more help from her if she didn't lie. Surely Cailean would understand. She shook her head. "No, we're not."

Rhona audibly expelled her breath. "Thank God."

Allison sat up. "Why do you say that?"

Startled, Rhona bit her lip. "Sorry." She lowered her head, and for a moment, there was silence. "It just fits better into our plan."

"What plan?" Allison asked, not quite understanding why her stomach was tied in knots.

Rhona looked at her seriously. "I don't know what you know about our situation here, but it's not entirely simple. With our wedding, Malcolm and I want to make peace between the clans in western Scotland, not to divide them. But for that, we need support, including from Cailean. We want him to mediate between the clans. He's the only one Hamish will listen to."

Allison wondered if Cailean might see it differently, but she didn't say anything. "That means Hamish won't approve of your marriage."

She knew it would be a difficult task for Cailean to convince Hamish of all people.

Rhona shook her head. "He'll rave."

"Because he wants to marry you," Allison said carefully.

Attentively, Rhona looked at her. "You know quite a lot."

She raised her shoulders. "In my time, it's my profession to gather information."

At the word profession, Rhona frowned but then nodded. "Like Cailean. That's why we need him so badly. He knows more about the clans and their relationships than anyone else."

Allison wondered whether she should tell Rhona about Hamish's secret, but Cailean knew, and that would have to be enough. He could use that information to his advantage when he needed it. But there was something else she wanted to know.

"Why were you so relieved when you found out I wasn't Cailean's

wife?"

Rhona raised her head. "Why would you even pretend that?"

Allison tried to keep a neutral expression. What had happened between her and Cailean was none of Rhona's business. So she stuck to the truth. "Because Ian wouldn't have let him bring me otherwise. It was the only way."

"Hmmm," Rhona murmured.

Allison felt like they were in the middle of a dance where neither knew exactly what the dance steps were, but each depended on the other.

Rhona took a deep breath. "I'm sorry to be so inquisitive, but when you have a history like Cailean, and I do, you become cautious. Not only that, our lives, as well as others' lives, depend on it."

Allison listened. She felt like she was on the cusp of discovering the exciting backstory, of which she already knew fragments. She always felt like that when she was on the trail of a story. But she tried hard to restrain herself so as not to frighten Rhona.

"I don't know your story," she said, "but I have a feeling it's important."

Rhona looked into the distance again and sighed. Then she took the bait. "As you know, our family name is MacGilvie. It was..." she broke off and corrected herself, "it is a small clan in Glen Duisk. My father was the chief, and we've actually always maintained friendly relations with all our neighbors: the Ranalds, the Grants, and the Macleans. Even with the Macdonalds and Camerons. It's necessary when you're so small. But then there was a fight with the Macleans over a herd of cattle they accused our father of stealing. There was a battle, and my father was captured in the process."

She told the story unemotionally as if it were not her own. Allison knew this was often the case with people who were traumatized. She was silent so as not to interrupt Rhona's reminiscence, but she realized that this was nothing like a history book or a text about the history of the clans she had found on the internet. This was the real life of these people. She shuddered at the thought.

"My mother tried to rescue my father but was killed. My father fought for her, but he also died. Since Cailean was too young to succeed my father and there were no male relatives, our clan was transferred to the Macleans." Her face was hard. "Chief Allan claimed he didn't want my parents' death and felt responsible for us. He raised us along with his children and always treated us well. He even brought our grandmother to Dundarg so we could have her close by. He gave Cailean an excellent education, probably because he noticed that Cailean could be of use to him and certainly to keep him complacent so as not to expect to regain control of our clan. We've

had a good life and have always depended on each other. But we also vowed to protect the people in our clan from suffering again. Our clan was considered too small and was fair game for a takeover by being accused of stealing cattle."

She sounded bitter.

Allison let the story sink in. She finally understood a few things. Cailean and Hamish had indeed grown up together, but they were not brothers. Hamish feared that Cailean wanted his clan back and was trying to keep him complacent.

"How old were you when this happened?"

Rhona looked at her steadfastly. "I was five, and Cailean was six."

"Can you remember your parents?"

She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

"That must have been very hard," Allison said, trying to imagine six-year-old Cailean, who had lost both parents, being brought to the castle to be raised by the man responsible for his parents' deaths. She wondered if he had hated the old Laird.

"What is Hamish's role in this?" continued Allison, realizing that she was just thinking as a journalist and beginning to look at all sides of the story.

Rhona didn't answer right away, then she raised her shoulders. "Hamish is like our brother. We grew up together because he didn't have any siblings. Ila came much later. He loves Cailean more than anything, but it's also difficult for him since he actually wants to return our clan, but on the other hand, he's afraid Cailean will leave. He's completely torn, and I've been dreading the day he becomes the Laird for a long time."

"And why does he want to marry you?" asked Allison curiously.

Rhona averted her eyes and shrugged. "Probably because he thinks it's a good connection and secures his position."

There was something else she wasn't saying, Allison sensed it keenly but didn't ask.

Rhona chewed on her lower lip, then jerked away. She turned to Allison. "You know, it's all about securing good connections in the Highlands. And the best way to do that is through marriage. A cleverly arranged marriage can make a clan very strong and protect it for many years."

"Sometimes even for centuries," Allison said.

"Aye."

"That's why you want to marry Malcolm?"

Rhona shook her head. "It's a good connection that will help many, but I...," she hesitated, "I love him. And he loves me. It wasn't planned."

Allison smiled. "In my day, almost all marriages are love

marriages."

"Really?" asked Rhona breathlessly.

She nodded. "But this is good for you. Not only do you have a love match, but you also have a good connection."

Rhona chewed on her lower lip again. "I hope one day Hamish will see it that way. But that's why it's so important to have Cailean on our side. He'll convince Hamish."

"I'm sure he will."

Especially if he used the information Allison had given him.

"And then if we have a strong alliance here in the north with the Grants, who are friendly with the Ranalds, we can secure the Macleans' territory to the south and east. That will give a lot of stability to the western Highlands."

"And how is that going to work?"

Rhona smiled. "Malcolm's base is a Cameron, and if Cailean marries their daughter, that would be a very good match."

Allison stared at Rhona, and suddenly, her heart was pounding so hard it was almost uncomfortable. It was hard for her to breathe. "That's why you were so relieved that I wasn't his wife," she said.

Rhona nodded. "Our whole plan would fall apart if this goes wrong."

Allison swallowed. "Does he know about this plan yet?"

To Allison's dismay, Rhona nodded again. "We discussed it last year, and basically, it was even his idea. He didn't want to marry her, though, because he didn't want such a close relationship with Malcolm." She smiled and raised her hands. "But now that this has developed with him and me, there's nothing standing in the way of his marriage."

And I don't want him to marry her either, Allison thought, choking down the bitter lump that had formed in her throat. But then she scolded herself for being a fool. She had no right to him, and besides, she was going home. So, he could marry whomever he wanted. Just because she had kissed him once, and a little more, didn't mean they had to get married right away.

"That sounds like a good plan," she choked out.

Rhona smiled with satisfaction. "It is. Most importantly, Hamish will also realize that this constellation is even better than what he came up with. And who knows, maybe we'll get Hamish to marry a Campbell, too. Then all will be well."

Allison looked down at her hands, which she had knotted in her lap. She had to get away from here as soon as possible. She was already too much involved. "Can you help me get home as soon as possible?" she asked quietly.

Rhona smiled. "But of course. I'll do my best. What do you need for

that?"

Allison sighed. "I need to know exactly where the stone is. And I need an amulet. Then I just need to return to Dundarg."

It sounded so simple.

Rhona thought. "I can explain to you where the stone is. It's not that far from our house. It's in the little wood by the spring. But I don't have an amulet. My grandmother told me that women always have their own. Where is yours?"

Allison pursed her mouth. "Hamish took it from me."

She did not want to tell more right now. She had to get out of there as quickly as possible and think. Alone.

Fortunately, Rhona did not ask. "The only amulet I have is mine," she simply said.

"Can you make a copy?" asked Allison.

Rhona shook her head. "I don't think it's that simple." She smiled. "But I'll figure something out. After all, I owe you for not being there when you needed me. We'll find a way."

Allison prayed she would be right. All of a sudden, she just wanted to get out of here. From this room, this castle, and this time.

"Anne," Rhona called out, rising to her feet.

The door opened. "Yes, my lady?"

"What time is dinner?"

Anne's face darkened a little. "Soon, my lady. There was an argument in the kitchen. But it's all settled now."

"Good, please let Malcolm know I need to see him. And before dinner, please prepare a room for Lady Allison to occupy. She doesn't wish to stay in the same room with her husband."

Allison froze and turned to Rhona. She was watching her intently.

"I think it's best. If you're not married, I can't justify you sharing a room, and I don't want to hurt your reputation."

Her hazel eyes were like a bird of prey, not missing the slightest movement.

Allison forced herself to look relieved. "Thank you. I had been wondering how to get out of the predicament this lie put me in."

Rhona smiled as well. "That's exactly what gatekeepers are for."

But Allison wasn't sure Cailean's sister had bought into her charade.

After visiting her new room, which was in a completely different part of the castle than the other one, Allison went to dinner. She noticed that the only way between the two rooms was through the Great Hall. Rhona had thought it out well. She probably didn't want anything to happen between Allison and Cailean.

Too late, Allison thought as she remembered the scene in the bathroom. Way too late, she thought, as she remembered Cailean's looks and the fluttering in the pit of her stomach.

But she couldn't help how things were, and she didn't want to stand in anyone's way here, especially not the clans allying and finding peace. And finally, she actually didn't want to stay in this time. She would get over this infatuation after she returned home. Someday, this would be a dream-like memory to her, and Cailean would be a distant memory. Over four hundred years far into the distance, she thought bitterly. Now, on the other hand, it was her reality too.

At dinner, Rhona cleverly placed Allison next to her so that she could not see or speak to Cailean, who was sitting next to Malcolm. As he came into the hall, his eyes met hers and wordlessly asked how things had gone with Rhona. She nodded slightly but quickly averted her eyes. She needed to talk to him about why she was sleeping in another room but didn't know how or when to accomplish that. Plus, it almost hurt to look at him.

Dinner passed almost entirely in silence. Allison could hardly bring herself to eat a bite, although she had been very hungry earlier and after the weeks in the dungeon and the days in the saddle. She had eaten mainly dry bread or a strange porridge and should have greatly enjoyed the roast. Rhona and Cailean were also avoiding each other, and Cailean and Malcolm had nothing to talk about with each other anyway.

Hardly anyone seemed to notice that the host and his guests were not talking to each other, and there was loud chatter and laughter in the hall. Allison busied herself with people-watching. She still found it

fascinating to see these people who were here in the flesh and would soon be a part of history when she returned home.

After they finished, Rhona rose and motioned for Allison to stand as well. "We're going to retreat," she explained to Malcolm. Cailean, on the other hand, didn't give Rhona a glance.

He looked at Allison questioningly, then smiled in slight amusement. Of course, he expected in the evening that they would continue what they had started this afternoon. Allison bit her lower lip and struggled with her guilty conscience.

Malcolm grabbed Rhona's hand and kissed it, then pulled her close and kissed her on the mouth. One hand went into her hair, and he whispered something in her ear that made her smile.

Cailean gritted his teeth and averted his eyes. Allison was glad he was looking at his plate and not at her. Then Rhona took her by the arm and led Allison to the stairs leading to her new room.

Just as they reached the steps, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that Cailean had stood up. He was watching them, and a steep wrinkle had appeared on his forehead. He took a deep breath as if wanting to call out to them, but then Malcolm said something and told him to sit back down. Cailean, however, shook his head and started to move. "Rhona, wait!" he called.

She turned around, "Yes, brother?"

The two stared at each other. "Where are you going?"

Rhona smiled. "I'm taking Allison to her room and to make sure she has everything she needs for the night. This must have been an exhausting time for her, and she is very tired. Maybe you should go to sleep, too. We can talk tomorrow."

Cailean looked at Allison, and there was confusion and disappointment in his gaze. She only managed to meet his gaze for a moment.

"You're really going to sleep already?"

Allison nodded. "Your sister is right. It was very exhausting."

"But why...", Cailean continued. He hesitated, then nodded and said, "Good night, Allison. Sleep well." To Rhona, he nodded frostily. "We'll talk tomorrow."

His sister smiled. "I would be delighted. There is much to discuss."

She took Allison's arm and led her up the stairs. All the while, Allison felt Cailean's gaze on her back, and she was deeply ashamed to have disappointed him so much. She hadn't even had the guts to tell him why she was sleeping elsewhere.

Rhona soon left her alone and assured her once again she would do everything she could to make sure Allison could travel home soon. Allison believed her because it was clear that Rhona wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible. But perhaps that was just as well.

Allison undressed down to her undergarment and stretched out under the thin blanket. But she could not sleep. Her limbs ached from the long ride and the nights in the dungeon. Actually, it was a relief to lie in a real bed, but her heart yearned for something else, and she tossed and turned restlessly. Actually, she had wanted to lie in Cailean's arms and explore his body. This thought seemed almost absurd to her now. What had she been thinking that she could have sex with someone here?

She remembered what she had resolved when she first planned this trip to the past—do not get involved with a man. That had worked out really well. It really would be better to leave before it developed further.

Her head knew it was the right thing, but her body and especially her heart longed for Cailean, for his touch, his laughter, his closeness, his calm, and his strength. Allison felt safe around him, and now she was lost and lonely. So much so that it almost physically hurt.

Briefly, she considered getting up and going to Cailean, but someone would surely notice, and Rhona would know. A rebellious part of her said, so what? But another part didn't want to mess with Rhona. Besides, she wasn't sure she'd only be able to talk to Cailean if she went to his room now.

So, she spent almost the entire night with her restless thoughts and only fell into a half-sleep around dawn, from which she soon awoke again. She hoped that today she would be able to explain to Cailean why she had slept here even if she hadn't figured that out yet.

Cailean did not appear at breakfast, and Allison's heart grew heavy. Rhona, on the other hand, seemed very content and chatted about the weather while other people were around. Then, she told Allison she already had an idea as to how they could get an amulet and that soon nothing would stand in the way of their departure.

Not knowing what else to do, Allison went into the castle courtyard after breakfast. She felt as if Rhona or someone else was watching her. It wasn't surprising but was becoming more and more tense.

She watched the blacksmith at work and the maids tending to the laundry. Once again, she got the impression that Freuchie Castle was a place where one could live well.

Although she didn't know if it was allowed, she once again climbed the stairs to the battlements that led to the small tower where she had sat with Cailean yesterday. It had been less than twenty-four hours, but it seemed like an eternity to her.

Looking down at the landscape from the battlements, she saw two figures walking at the foot of the castle. They were two men in kilts, one rather blue and the other rust red. Allison recognized Cailean immediately. Her heart leapt just looking at him. The man next to him had to be Malcolm. They seemed to have no particular destination and were apparently deep in conversation. Malcolm was explaining something, using his hands and making large, sweeping gestures. Cailean, on the other hand, had his hands clasped behind his back and seemed to be listening intently.

Allison was pleased that the two were talking and getting to know each other. If she was to believe Rhona, this conversation was good for all the Scots who lived in the western Highlands. Her heart grew heavy, however, when she thought that she herself, on the other hand, was not at all good for peace. She had never been in such a position before and didn't like it at all. Normally, she was free to decide who she wanted to be with and who she did not.

The two men stopped, and while Malcolm pointed to the castle,

Cailean looked up at her. He was so far away that she couldn't see his face, but she knew for a fact that he was looking at her and recognized her. She wondered what he was thinking.

Then the two continued on their way and soon disappeared behind a small group of trees. Allison left the battlements and went up the tower. She knew Cailean would find her here if he wanted to. She hoped and feared at the same time that he would come.

The time seemed to drag on endlessly, and Allison again watched a bird of prey circling in the blue summer sky. At some point, a bell rang, and Allison realized that dinner was being served and Cailean would not be coming. She scrambled to her feet and swallowed her disappointment.

She was just in the middle of the walkway when the door on the other side opened. Her heart leapt as Cailean came out to meet her. When he caught sight of her, he looked relieved but didn't smile.

He stepped toward her. "So here you are."

Allison nodded. "I've been waiting for you."

Now he did smile. "That's what I was hoping. Malcolm had a lot to say, though, and it wasn't easy to get rid of him."

He was about to say something else when the door to the battlement opened again. Rhona appeared in the doorway, looking indecisive.

Cailean took a deep breath and then turned around. "If you want to watch us, you're welcome to do so from the castle courtyard."

"Cailean..." she said, stepping from one foot to the other. "There's food, and I just wanted to let Allison know."

"That's bullshit and you know it. I decide when I talk to Allison and when I don't. You're not going to stop me and you're not going to listen. Now go."

Rhona pressed her lips together and Allison thought she would say something more, but then she turned away. To her surprise, she really did appear in the castle courtyard moments later, watching her with her arms folded. It must have been really important to her.

"I think she's very worried," she told Cailean.

"There's no need for that. I'm old enough and can take good care of myself." He took a step closer, but didn't touch her. "Why are you sleeping somewhere else?"

Allison's breath caught in her throat. It was direct. "Because it's better that way."

"Is it?" he asked quietly.

Her heart contracted painfully when she saw his gaze. She nodded. "We're not married, Cailean."

He took a deep breath. "I missed you last night."

Allison lowered her head and studied her feet. She didn't want him

to see in her eyes how much she had missed him, too. Instead, she said, "I'm sorry I didn't do what I promised you last night."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

Allison glanced down at Rhona, hoping she really couldn't be heard. A little quieter, she said, "You know...you made me come, but I haven't returned the favor to you yet. I'm sorry I couldn't do more yesterday."

No sooner had she uttered the words than his face darkened. "Do you really think that's all I care about?"

Allison wasn't sure why she'd said that but added, "When you're disappointed about something like that, sometimes you think you're missing someone when all you really want is the physical."

She almost felt a little ridiculous saying such a thing and saw that she was hurting him.

Suddenly, he grabbed her arm and led her toward the tower. Allison was so surprised that she offered no resistance. Cailean glanced down at his sister. "You stay where you are." His voice sounded ominous.

He led her into the tower and closed the door behind them. He took a deep breath. "What happened yesterday when you talked to Rhona?"

Allison wrapped her arms around her torso. "Nothing."

"What did she say to you? Why are you behaving so differently?"

She pressed her lips together. "I'll be returning home soon. And she'll be helping me."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "When?"

Allison raised her shoulders. "As soon as I can."

He was silent for a while, and she saw him struggling with himself. Then suddenly, his posture changed. He took a step toward her and touched her gently on the arm. "Don't go," he begged.

Allison's heart contracted painfully, and she could only shake her head.

"Stay with me," he groaned. "Please."

She found it hard to catch her breath. "Cailean, you don't even know me."

"Yes, I do." He sounded agonized.

She shook her head. "Not really."

He had no idea who she was or what her life was like. Maybe he'd miss her body or the image he had of her, but not the person she really was. After all, she couldn't even explain to him what she was passionate about in life because he wouldn't understand any of it.

When he didn't answer, she added, "I can't stay."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't belong here."

She saw the pain in his eyes and would have liked to pull him into her arms. But that was not possible. She was not allowed to continue this. On the contrary, it was a good opportunity to make it clear to him that she could not stay.

"It's better this way. For everyone." She heard herself that her voice sounded almost pleading. "I don't want to get in anyone's way, and I just don't belong here."

She wondered if she should tell him about where she came from, but that would make things infinitely more complicated.

"What did Rhona tell you?" he asked harshly.

"This has nothing to do with your sister. I have to return home. That's why I came along, remember? So I could find the amulet. And now I have one." She swallowed. "I'm very grateful to you for bringing me here. Otherwise, I wouldn't have met Rhona, and I wouldn't be able to return home."

Cailean clenched his hands into fists. "Damn it, Allison, I wish you hadn't found Rhona. Not if it means losing you over it."

Allison stretched her back. Emotions were raging inside her, and she needed to put more distance between her and him. It wouldn't be much longer, and she would throw herself into his arms and forget everything else.

"I, on the other hand, am very happy to have found Rhona because it means I can finally go home. I haven't wanted anything else since I arrived here."

He raised his eyebrows. "Oh, yeah? Then why did you...yesterday afternoon," he broke off and made an indefinite hand gesture, "do that to me? Didn't it mean anything at all?"

Allison tried to gather all her dignity. Maybe it was better to hurt him to get her out of his mind. "It was purely physical," she said. "Yes, it was nice, but it was only physical. Where I come from, that kind of thing doesn't mean that much."

He stared at her as if she had lost her mind. "What are you talking about?"

She shrugged. "It is what it is. Thank you for everything you've done for me, but now it's time for me to leave."

"And that's it now?" he asked, upset.

Allison nodded. "I'm afraid so." It pained her to see him like this, but she knew it was better in the long run. "Can we go to dinner now?"

He turned away, and his voice sounded almost impassive as he said, "You go ahead. I'm not hungry."

Hesitantly, Allison stood and clasped her hands so she wouldn't accidentally touch him, her entire body ached with longing for him.

"Leave now," he said.

Still, she remained standing. What could she say to make him stop hurting so much?

He took a deep breath and shook his head. "I'll go then," he said and walked up the stairs to the tower.

Allison sunk against the door. The pain overwhelming her was so great she thought she might drown. But she realized that it was better this way. It hurt now, but he would soon forget her. She had to get away from here as quickly as possible.

It was late in the afternoon, and Allison was still in bed in a fetal position, trying to convince herself that it had been for the best. But she kept crying whenever she thought of Cailean's hurt look.

She couldn't even remember the last time she had cried over a man. She didn't do that, at least not out of heartbreak. She had cried recently after realizing that she had put herself and so many others in danger when she had gotten involved with Daniel Walden. But that hadn't been heartbreak, it had been anger at her own stupidity along with a tiny bit of fear. Now, on the other hand, she wasn't so sure that her heart wasn't breaking right now. Yet it was silly, because she and Cailean didn't even really know each other, she had told him so herself. So why did it hurt so damn much?

When there was a knock at her door, she jumped off the bed, startled. "Who is it?" she asked, annoyed that her voice sounded so shaky. She didn't know what to do in case it was Cailean.

"It's Malcolm," said a deep voice.

"What do you want?" she asked, thinking at the same moment that it was probably pretty rude to a clan leader to answer that way.

"Can you come out?"

Allison smoothed her dress and hair and wiped her eyes. Hopefully, he wouldn't notice that she had been crying. As gracefully as possible, she opened the door. "What can I do for you?"

Astonished, she noticed that Malcolm was uncomfortable. "Rhona sent me. She wants you to come to her." He hesitated, then added, "Please."

"Why?" Allison didn't feel like seeing Rhona. She didn't want to have to explain what had happened in the tower.

"Because she's talking to Cailean right now, and she wants your support."

Allison raised her eyebrows. "My support? I don't think Rhona needs that."

Malcolm looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid so. They are yelling at each other. Plus, she said she was going to tell him about the stone."

"Oh, no," Allison whispered. She had wanted to tell Cailean herself. It was her story.

She pushed past Malcolm and started running, but after only a few steps, it occurred to her that she had no idea where to find them, so she stopped and let Malcolm go first. He nodded gravely at her and then walked quickly down the stairs ahead of her. He wasn't running, but he was in a hurry.

The large hall was empty. In the middle of the afternoon, everyone was working. Only Ian rose from one of the benches. "Need a hand, Chief?"

Malcolm shook his head. "Not right now. But be ready."

Allison wondered what that might mean. Was the fight between the siblings that bad?

They reached the door of the same room where Rhona and Malcolm had been waiting for them when they first arrived. She could already hear voices from the end of the hallway. Allison quickened her steps, but when she arrived at the door, her courage disappeared, and she stopped.

"I'm not doing what you want," Cailean had just shouted.

"No, you always do what you want. But maybe you should think about your people for once."

"Let me worry about that! You're sticking your nose too deep into things that don't concern you."

She didn't know him like that. He was usually so gentle, but Rhona seemed to make him really angry. That was just the way it was with siblings.

But Rhona also seemed upset. Sharply, she said, "It is very much my business who you share a bed with."

Allison sucked in a startled breath and glanced at Malcolm, who only raised his shoulders in embarrassment.

"Oh, yeah? Then I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear that I didn't share a bed with Allison."

Technically, he was probably right, Allison thought because they hadn't been in bed. Nevertheless, the blood rushed to her cheeks. But then she pushed the thought aside. It wasn't helping anything now. She turned to Malcolm. "I can't go in there."

He just shrugged. "She told me to come and get you."

It was quieter inside, and Rhona spoke to him almost imploringly.

"Cailean, she's going to leave again soon. And not just anywhere to England, but through the stone to another time. She'll be gone soon, and you'll never see her again. Will you risk everything for that? Everything we've been fighting for for so long?"

A shiver ran down Allison's spine. So, Rhona had already told him. She listened breathlessly. What was he saying? But before she could

hear anything, Malcolm reached past her and opened the door.

Allison would have liked to run away, and Malcolm must have sensed that because he grabbed her upper arm and pulled her into the room. Rhona and Cailean wheeled around. They were facing each other in the middle of the room. Rhona had her hands on her hips, and her cheeks were glowing. Cailean, on the other hand, had his arms folded in front of his chest and was looking hostilely at his sister.

All eyes were on Allison, and she felt as if her legs were giving way under her. She was glad that Malcolm was still holding her.

"Here she is," he said as if delivering a package.

Rhona gasped, then turned to Allison. "Tell him it's the truth. He doesn't believe me."

Allison felt Cailean's gaze on her, and it took her a moment to find the courage to look at him. His gaze was no longer scowling but almost pleading as if hoping she would tell him that none of this was true.

"What did you tell him?" asked Allison, her voice sounding rough. Malcolm let go of her and stepped up next to Rhona. Allison swayed a little but then caught herself. This was something she had to fight through on her own.

Rhona straightened her shoulders. "Everything. About the stone, who the women were, what role Grandmother played. He knows what the amulet is about and who you are, too."

"I wish I could have told him myself," Allison said.

"But you didn't, that's why I had to do it. And he figured out himself that you are one of those women."

Allison closed her eyes. Of course, he did, he wasn't stupid. She realized that she should have told him about everything much earlier. Now it was too late, and she was at a disadvantage because she had no control over the amount of information that was shared. She opened her eyes and searched for Cailean's gaze.

"So it's really true?" he asked incredulously.

Allison nodded. "I came through the stone."

"From where?" he asked.

"From the future," she said and had to suppress a completely inappropriate giggle at how ridiculous she sounded.

"But that can't be." He sounded confused.

Allison spread her hands. "I didn't want to believe it either at first, but it's really true. That's why I don't know so many things and have acted stupidly at times."

She took a deep breath.

"And that's why you can do so many things," he said after a short silence, staring at her as if she were an exotic animal. Which, after all, she basically was. But his gaze made her uncomfortable.

Malcolm also seemed fascinated but not surprised. Apparently, Rhona must have already told him everything. The latter turned to Cailean, "Do you believe me now?"

He nodded slowly, and Allison couldn't believe he knew.

Rhona continued, "And do you see now that she doesn't belong here? She'll be leaving soon. So put her out of your mind."

Allison would have preferred to say that she was still there and there was no reason to talk about her that way, but she knew Rhona was right, so she kept quiet. But the scowl on Cailean's face made her heart heavy.

He turned toward her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I was afraid you wouldn't believe me."

His expression turned bitter. "And you were worried that I wouldn't be willing to help you then."

He might as well have accused her of having taken advantage of him because it hurt just as much. But it was the truth, even she had to admit that. So she nodded.

"Is that why you..." He broke off and glanced at Rhona and Malcolm.

Quickly, Allison said, "No. That's not why."

Although she had wanted to hurt him earlier so that he would forget about her, now she wanted him to know that she also felt something for him and had not just kissed him because she needed his help and wanted to manipulate him.

Cailean pressed his lips together and turned to the window. "I want to talk to Allison alone."

"No," Rhona said immediately.

He wheeled around. "If you meddle in my affairs again, I'll go away and never come back. Then you can figure out how to fix things with Hamish, the Macleans, and the Camerons. I don't care. I'm going to talk to Allison now."

But Allison wasn't sure she wanted to. It was too dangerous. She couldn't judge whether she could withstand his feelings. Probably, though, she had already hurt him far too much. She would just explain to him what had happened, and then it would be over even if it hurt.

But Rhona wasn't giving up so easily. "The problem is," she said, "Allison is leaving today. Right now, in fact. Ian is already waiting in the hall. He's going to take her to Dundarg."

Allison stared at her. "Now? But I don't have an amulet."

Rhona smiled. "Yes, you do, here's mine."

She opened the leather strap on her neck and handed the amulet to Allison. Stunned, she stared at it. She immediately felt the familiar tingling sensation that occurred even when the stone was far away.

She was so relieved she almost began to cry.

"Thank you," she whispered, "I can't thank you enough."

Rhona smiled a genuine smile. "It's what gatekeepers do. Now you can go home."

Allison stared at the amulet. She was torn between joy and deep pain. She didn't dare look at Cailean. "But then you won't have one," she finally said. "How will the others recognize you when they travel through the stone?"

Rhona shrugged her shoulders. "I'll get one back all right. Malcolm told me that he recently received a messenger who brought him an amulet just like it with a black curl."

Allison turned to Malcolm. "Then you do have my amulet?"

He shook his head. "I knew it was from Hamish, but I had no idea what he was trying to tell me. I assumed," he cleared his throat and gave Rhona an aggrieved look, "that he was trying to tell me that he knew about Rhona and me and wanted to claim her. That's why I sent him back the amulet and included a strand of Rhona's hair. He should have received it by now."

Rhona nodded. "I didn't know about all this, though, and I would have stopped him from sending it back. I'll ask Hamish for the amulet the next time I see him."

She made it sound like they were old friends who met regularly. But Allison didn't care. She had an amulet and could finally go home. She closed her fingers around it and felt the tingle. Her ticket home. "Thank you," she said again. "I really appreciate it."

Silence had fallen, and Allison felt Cailean's gaze lying heavily on her. She forced herself to look at him. What she saw almost broke her heart.

"So you really want to go?" he asked, sounding unnaturally stiff.

Allison nodded, unable to say anything.

He seemed to want to say more but then simply pressed his lips together.

As the silence stretched again, Malcolm said, "Ian is waiting in the hall, and I think you should leave soon. It's getting late."

Confused, Allison looked at him. "Right now?" She didn't know if she could.

"Yes, then you can still arrive at Glen Brim this the evening."

Allison swallowed. Yes, she had wanted to leave, but so soon? She gave Cailean a helpless look but didn't know what to expect from him.

He turned away.

"Perhaps it would be better if you said goodbye," Malcolm now said. He had apparently taken over from Rhona now.

Allison broke out in a sweat. She couldn't do it, but Cailean nodded stiffly.

"Have a great trip, Allison. It was an honor to meet you."

The lump forming in Allison's throat was so big she could hardly breathe. That was going to be it now? She couldn't just leave like that, not after everything that had been. She looked helplessly at Cailean again, but he was standing upright and his face a mask. He seemed almost unconcerned. And suddenly, she felt alone, very alone.

Everyone was waiting for her answer, but Allison could not speak. She wanted to throw herself into his arms and tell him she wasn't leaving. But she couldn't. It was a long time before she choked out, "thank you."

Cailean nodded curtly and went to the door. He paused briefly, looked at her again, then was gone.

Allison felt like she was going to throw up. She didn't realize she was shaking until Rhona reached for her hand.

"I think it would be best if you left as soon as possible. Ian has already made all the arrangements. He'll get you to Dundarg safely."

Allison listened in a daze and did not respond.

Rhona gently squeezed her hand. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I know it hurts, but it's better this way, believe me. You're so strong, Allison. But so is he. You don't have to worry about him. I'll take care of him. As we've always done."

Oddly enough, her words comforted Allison a little. She knew Rhona hadn't done this out of malice and that she didn't begrudge her brother his happiness but that the clan was above everything to her. Besides, they would have had no future anyway, Allison told herself. She wanted to go home and couldn't stay here. She closed her fingers tighter around the amulet.

Malcolm had stepped up to the window and was saying something to Rhona. Allison had to force herself to lift her head and listen to him.

"I actually don't think they can leave today. There's a thunderstorm brewing, and I don't want them to get caught on the way to Glen Brim. There's no shelter there."

Rhona made a frustrated noise, but nodded. "Then they'll just leave in the morning." She put an arm around Allison's shoulders. "Come on, I'll take you to your room. Would you like something to eat? It would be good for you to fortify yourself before the long journey."

Without resistance, Allison let Rhona lead her out of the room. She didn't know if she could bear to spend another night under the same roof as Cailean. All of a sudden, she just wanted to get away, away from the pain that had taken over her entire body.

In a daze, Allison sat in her room while darker and darker clouds gathered outside, trying to process what had just happened. The air had become oppressive, and Allison felt like she could hardly breathe. But that might have been due to the weight on her heart and not just the thunderstorm.

Rhona had arranged for some food to be brought to her room, but Allison hadn't really eaten any of it. She tried to prepare herself for the trip tomorrow. It would take them three days to get to Dundarg, and Rhona had already explained in detail where she could find the stone.

Not much could go wrong now. Then why was she so afraid? Or was it sadness? She couldn't quite place the feeling, but she was racked with anxiety thinking about her departure.

The first sound of thunder rumbled in the west as she heard voices in the hallway. Allison sat up and listened. Or had she imagined it?

But there it was again.

"Let me through, man," said a voice so familiar to her.

Cailean. Allison's heart beat faster. What was he doing here?

"This is the women's wing. You shouldn't be here."

That was Ian.

"Oh yeah, then what are you doing here?"

"I'm keeping watch."

"Isn't that Malcolm's voice I hear coming from Rhona's room? This is not a women's wing."

"It is for you."

"I will go to her room now, and you will let me through."

Thunder rolled through the valley again, and a short time later, lightning lit up the room. Allison shuddered.

Ian must have said something else in reply because Cailean said, "She'll want to talk to me. Don't worry."

Then Allison heard quick footsteps in the hallway. She jumped away from the door and toward the window. She was breathing so fast that she almost missed him knocking.

"Allison?"

She cleared her throat. "Yes?"

He knocked again. "Allison? I know you're in there."

Apparently, he hadn't heard her. No wonder she could hardly hear herself, she was so breathless.

Allison gritted her teeth and forced herself to walk to the door. There was more rumbling in the distance, and just as he was knocking again, she opened the door.

She didn't bother to pretend to be surprised. They were long past decency and polite formulas. When she saw him, feelings of happiness and fear flowed through her at the same time.

"Can we talk?" he asked, going back to being the Cailean she knew, though perhaps a touch more distant.

She hesitated, then nodded.

"May I come in?"

This time she thought longer but finally nodded again.

Cailean turned. "She wants to talk to me, and she's willingly letting me into her room if you wanted to know. You can leave your guard post now."

Ian grumbled something, and then Cailean slipped into the room, which suddenly seemed much too small. It was only a few steps from the door where he stood to the window where Allison had retreated.

For a while, they just stared at each other. Then he asked, "How are you?"

Allison had no words for all that she felt, so she just raised her shoulders. "How are you?" she asked instead.

For a moment, he looked at the floor, then he said, "It's so hard for me to believe all this, but now I'm beginning to understand. Most of all, it explains so much."

All of a sudden, Allison had tears in her eyes. "It probably does."

Cailean took a step toward her. His gaze was full of longing. "Now I understand why I find you so fascinating." He cleared his throat. "I don't know how many times it occurred to me that I'd never met a woman like you."

Allison lowered her head. His words did her so much good, but she couldn't allow herself these feelings. "And that's exactly why I have to leave again, Cailean. This world is so foreign to me, I don't fit in here."

His face darkened a little. "And what if I ask you to stay?"

Allison's breath caught in her throat. She didn't have an answer for that. She hadn't expected that, now that he knew who she really was. "Cailean," she said softly.

He was with her in one step, standing directly in front of her but not touching her. His gaze was so tender that she almost melted. "I know it's a lot to ask. And yes, you're right, I don't really know you,

but I want to know you. I want to know everything about you, and even if I don't know your world, I know you're the most wonderful woman I've ever met. I can't just let you leave." He swallowed. "I've already asked you to stay once today, and I mean it. Allison, please stay with me."

She would have liked to cover her ears. He was saying all the right things, and yet she couldn't stay. It almost tore her apart.

"I don't belong here, Cailean. I can't live here."

For a very brief moment, he closed his eyes. "Please, Allison. I can protect you, I will always be with you. Nothing will happen to you, I'll make sure of that. You don't have to be afraid."

She lifted her face and looked at him, seeing his troubled yet hopeful eyes searching her face for a sign that his plea was being heard. He reached for her hands, and his touch was as electrifying as the thunderstorm outside. Lightning and thunder followed each other faster and faster now.

"You also feel that there's something between us. I didn't imagine it, did I?"

Allison shook her head before she could think about it. The hope in his face took over again.

"Then stay, at least for a while."

She closed her eyes because when she looked into his face, she knew she'd say yes. She clung to his hands. "I can't," she said instead.

"Look at me," he pleaded, his words almost lost in the crack of thunder. "Look at me, Allison."

He sounded calm. Obediently, she opened her eyes. His gaze was soft.

"Why can't you?"

Allison thought of her home, her life, her job, her friends, all the comforts of the 21st century. And she thought of Rhona's plan, how she planned to unite the clans. She also thought of Hamish and how much he hated her. How was she going to live here with someone trying to kill her?

Lightning hissed across the sky, and shortly thereafter, thunder cracked. The thunderstorm was now very close. She could even feel the ground vibrating under her feet.

When she didn't answer, he took a deep breath and asked softly, "Is there a man waiting for you? Children?"

She shook her head. "No husband and no children. Just friends and family."

"A clan?"

Allison thought of Lauren, Caitrin, and Jenna, which now also included Evan. "Something like that. They don't know what happened to me, and they're waiting for me."

A worry line formed on his forehead. "That's why you want to go back."

She nodded. "Also."

"Why else?"

He really seemed to want to know, and Allison realized this put her at ease. "I have a life there. It's so different from any life I could have here."

"Tell me about it."

She wanted to so much because she knew it would give him joy to hear about all these things, even though he would probably just declare her crazy. But she also knew that it would be too much for him. That's why she just said, "I have a job, I make my own money, I have all the freedom I want, and I can travel wherever I want. I can't give all that up. As a woman, I could never do any of it here."

She saw that he understood, but it pained him to hear that. She held his hands tighter. "I wish I could stay."

She hesitated. He was really trying to understand her, to see her for the person she was. He dared to believe the unbelievable. That was why he deserved the truth, even if it would only give him more hope again.

"And what I said today was a lie. It wasn't just the physical between us. It was much more."

He closed his eyes, and she felt him tremble.

The next moment, lightning crackled down, glaring light filled the room, and the thunder that followed was so deafening that Allison thought for a moment the castle was going to collapse.

Cailean took Allison in his arms and pulled her away from the window.

"What was that?" she cried. Her ears rang.

"Lightning struck somewhere nearby," Cailean said, but he didn't sound worried.

Outside, the next flash of lightning came down, and thunder followed right after.

"Come here, it's too dangerous by the window." He pulled her closer to the door.

She let herself sink into his arms and tried to calm her heartbeat. Of course, she was already familiar with lightning strikes, but in her time, lightning rods were everywhere, and above all else, the fire department came when you needed it.

Cailean's breathing was rapid, and suddenly she was very aware of his closeness, feeling his body right against hers.

Voices could be heard outside in the hallway.

"Do you have to go, too?"

Cailean shook his head. "I'm a guest here. They will come for me

when they need me. Right now, I'm with you."

He wrapped his arms tighter around her, and Allison enjoyed the embrace while the thunderstorm continued outside. A gust of rain drove in through the window and drenched the ground where they had just been standing.

Suddenly she felt his mouth very close to her ear. "Allison," he said softly, and his voice was almost a moan. "I want you so much."

She closed her eyes, felt his closeness and his lust. Suddenly she could no longer think. It was as if a switch had been flipped inside her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, stood on her tiptoes, put her cheek against his, and inhaled his scent deeply. His arms closed tighter around her, and he buried his face in her hair and took a deep breath.

She snuggled closer and closer to him and suddenly felt how hard he already was. This fact sparked her own lust, and she moaned softly. "Cailean."

His hands wandered over her back, his breathing quickening. "What do you want, Allison? Tell me," he demanded, sounding almost tortured.

"You," she whispered in his ear. "I want you."

She felt his entire body tense. "Are you sure?"

She reached into his hair and brought her face right in front of his so she could look him in the eye. "Take me, Cailean."

And then he finally released his desire. He conquered her mouth and immediately penetrated her with his tongue. His hands seemed to be all over her. And Allison's body responded with equal passion. She tried to wrap a leg around his hips, but he was too tall. With almost no effort, he lifted her up, so she was sitting on his hip, eye level with him. Not for a second did they break their kiss. She marveled at how much strength he had.

Allison tugged his shirt out of the kilt, desperate to touch him. In the next moment, her hands slid over his skin. Although she had known he was muscular, she was surprised at how hard his muscles were.

Cailean groaned and pressed her against him. He took a step toward the bed but then suddenly stopped in the middle of the kiss.

"What is it?" asked Allison, gasping. She was trembling with desire and didn't want to wait any longer. She needed him so much.

"Tell me if you really want it. I might be able to stop now, but not in a minute."

His voice was hoarse.

Allison forced herself to think, although her body was trying to take over, and said, "Yes, I do."

He groaned but, apparently sensing that she was about to say

something more, held back his desire.

"But I need to leave anyway. Do you still want to?"

She prayed he would say yes because she wasn't sure she would survive if he didn't take her now. She had to feel him inside her.

Outside, there was lightning again, and for a moment, his face lit up like a ghost. She tried to interpret his expression but could not.

His answer was a kiss so deep and full of desire that it took her breath away. In a few steps, he was at the bed, placing her on it. Then he was on top her. Allison pulled him against her, wanting to feel his weight on her. As he lay there, she enjoyed the heaviness of his body. Deeply he penetrated her mouth with his tongue as his hand moved to her breast, caressing her through her dress. Allison arched up to meet him and moaned, already pressing harder against him. His erection, which she felt at her hip, excited her so much she squirmed under him, encouraging him slide on top of her so she could feel him between her legs. With one leg, he spread her thighs and lay on top of her. Allison gasped and began to move her hips.

"Please," she whispered in his mouth.

He paused, breathing heavily. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No," she whispered, bending toward him. "Take me already."

She could see that he was amazed, and she herself was shocked at how great her lust was and how much she wanted him inside her.

His hand wandered lower and gathered her skirt. He moved up her thigh, not slowly and torturously but purposefully. He found her center, and Allison opened her legs for him. He drove his fingers inside her, and the sensation of pleasure that coursed through Allison was sweet and agonizing at the same time. She pressed her pelvis against his hand and enjoyed him moaning.

"I can't wait anymore," he gasped.

He couldn't have said anything nicer. Allison reached down to unbutton his pants. But then noticed he was wearing his kilt. She had forgotten that but how convenient it was in this situation. She pulled the fabric up, exposing his manhood. She briefly allowed herself to touch him. He was big and hard, and her lust was stoked even more.

As she stroked his member and quickened her rhythm, he paused with his hand inside her and closed his eyes. "Oh, God," he murmured.

Allison sped up the movement and felt his hips move with it.

"Stop now," he muttered suddenly.

She had to smile and moved her hand down and up again, agonizingly slowly. With a noise that sounded more like a growl, he suddenly jerked her hand up and slid onto it. He was right at her entrance, pressing lightly against it, and she shivered with arousal. She pushed her hips forward, opened her legs a little wider, wanting to feel him inside her.

Then finally, he entered her, his eyes fixed on her the whole time. She held onto his gaze while all her attention focused on his member, which he pushed further and further into her. Allison arched up to meet him, wrapping her legs around his hips, pulling him deeper inside her until he filled her completely. He was still looking at her, but she saw that he was trembling and had to hold back. But he shouldn't need to. So she pulled his head to her, kissed him, and urged him with her hips to move. He did so immediately, pulling back, thrusting into her again. Even deeper this time. He gasped.

Allison picked up his rhythm and felt the orgasm building inside her. It didn't take much for her because she had been pining for him for so long, and he felt so good inside her. She clung to him, enjoying the fact that he was still holding her arms. His hips rubbed against her pelvis, and she felt his incredible strength and masculinity. His panting drove her ever closer to climaxing, and she enjoyed his pleasure as much as her own. Then all at once, he thrust deep inside her, his entire body tensing, and he let out a hoarse moan. She freed one of her hands and placed it on his chest as he reared up and came.

This sight of him above her, coupled with the feeling of him inside her and pouring himself into her, sent her into the abyss and her own orgasm overtook her. She felt like she was going to break into a thousand pieces. She cried out his name and clung to him as he sank back on top of her and held her in his arms. While still feeling the waves of energy pulsing through her, she heard him whisper her name into her ear. Her heart raced, and her breathing was rapid, but slowly her body calmed again as a comforting warmth spread through her, and her body slipped into relaxation. She pulled him tightly against her and deeply inhaled his scent, so masculine and powerful. She felt as if she could smell his satisfaction, but maybe it was just her own.

His heartbeat also gradually calmed down. He tried to get out of her, but Allison wrapped her legs around his hips. "Stay with me," she said softly. "I still want to feel you."

He propped himself up on his elbow and smiled wanly. "That was amazing."

Allison smiled and stroked his lips with her finger. "I thought so, too."

A small wrinkle appeared on his forehead. "I'm sorry I came down on you like that. Actually, I promised not to do just that."

Allison had to laugh, still feeling him inside her, though his erection was slowly diminishing. "Maybe I wanted you to come all over me."

Surprise painted itself on his features. "I didn't know women could want something like that."

Allison felt her heart might burst. He was so wonderful, almost

naive about women, and so eager to learn and do right by her how she would have loved to be his teacher. In the process, she was also learning so much, especially about herself. She had never experienced anything like this. Yes, she had felt desire many times, but this was different. Not only did she want his body, but she desired everything about him. She was ready to share everything with him and allow him all the way into her soul. That's how deep it went. And that's what scared her.

She moved, and he slid out of her. Immediately she felt empty and almost a little embarrassed. He flipped his kilt down and the skirts of her dress as well but stayed right next to her, still gazing at her. "Can I ask you one more thing?"

Allison nodded.

"You weren't a virgin, were you?"

Slowly, she shook her head. "Is that bad?"

To her surprise, he smiled. "On the contrary. I was briefly worried in between that I'd scare you off if you thought it was always like this."

Allison had to smile. "A woman would be very lucky if it was always like this."

She could see he was pleased with the compliment, and for a moment, they just looked at each other. Very briefly, the thought occurred to her how wonderful it would be to have sex like this for the rest of her life, plus a man who was like Cailean, protective, caring, willing to learn, and so perceptive. How wonderful such a life could be. She pushed that thought far aside, however. This was a dream and nothing more. A life like this did not exist in this time.

Allison thought about what she had said to him just before they had landed on the bed, and her heart contracted painfully. But she knew she had to bring it up again, just to make sure he really understood.

"It was beautiful, Cailean, and I'll never forget it. But I still need to go back."

She could almost see his heart grow heavy, but he nodded. "I know that."

She swallowed and added softly, "And this can't happen again."

He frowned and was about to say something when voices were heard in the hallway. Someone shouted, "All men into the yard. The fire has spread to the horse barn."

Cailean cursed and was immediately on his feet. Allison sat up as well. "There's a fire?"

He nodded, tucked his shirt into the waistband of the kilt, and threw the plaid over his shoulder.

"What can I do?" asked Allison, standing up as well.

"Go into the hall and help the other women provide buckets of water. Or whatever Rhona or anyone else tells you to do."

He paused, pulled her to him, and kissed her on the mouth. Allison closed her eyes and took a deep breath. It felt so natural.

"Thank you for everything," he whispered.

She smiled and kissed him again, but only briefly. When he broke away from her and turned toward the door, she said, "Be careful."

He pushed back the latch and looked at her. "We'll talk more tomorrow."

Allison wrung her hands. "But I'm leaving in the morning."

She was worried that they were running out of time, and she didn't want what she had just said to be the last thing they talked about. She wanted to say goodbye properly.

He frowned. "I'll take you to Dundarg. We'll have plenty of time to talk on the way."

And then he was gone.

All of a sudden, Allison was glad that she had told him they should never do this again because she knew exactly that she couldn't sleep with him again. She would never go home if she let him get that close to her again. Cailean MacGilvie had come as close to her soul today as any man had ever come before.

Allison spent the night hauling buckets of water and carrying all sorts of belongings from the annexes into the Great Hall so they would be safe if the fire spread. And she had supported Rhona. An unexpected alliance had formed between the two women when Allison had observed Rhona in the hall looking helpless, not knowing what to do, while all the other women and children waited for her to give instructions. When she had walked over to her to ask her what to do, she had looked at her wide-eyed. "I've never done anything like this before," she had whispered. "I don't know how to run a castle."

Allison didn't really know how either, but she remembered what she had observed in emergency rooms and accidents, and she also considered what Jenna would probably have done right now. Because if there was anyone who could pragmatically solve situations, it was her friend.

Rhona gratefully accepted a few suggestions, and they continued to work together through the night. The fire had spread as the rain has subsided and because everything was dry from the many hot summer days. Soot-blackened men staggered into the hall and either unloaded things or fetched new buckets of water. And Allison was growing more and more concerned for Cailean. Then the first injured had come in, and suddenly Rhona was back in her element tending wounds. Allison, on the other hand, had continued to supervise, and, to her surprise, the other women were following her instructions. But the worry about Cailean accompanied her constantly.

Towards morning, the rain started again, which helped the men extinguish the fire. Dawn revealed that there was no major damage except for two burned outbuildings, the damaged roof of the tower, which had been struck by lightning, and minor burn injuries to people and animals.

When Allison saw Cailean and Malcolm walking across the courtyard together, relief flooded through her, and she sat down in a chair and closed her eyes. What a night. She had never experienced such wonderful and such terrible feelings in such quick succession.

She was grateful nothing had happened to Cailean, but she never wanted to feel that fear for him again. That night had intensified her desire to go home. Now that the fear was subsiding, she was exhausted and, still sitting in the chair, slipped into a deep slumber.

At some point, she felt someone lift her up. Strong arms held her, and she put her face against a broad chest. She knew instinctively it was Cailean and relaxed. He laid her down somewhere, probably on a bed, because it was soft. Allison rolled to her side and immediately fell asleep again.

When she awoke, it was dark again. Or still? Tangled dreams had disturbed her sleep. Dreams of fire, fear, but also passion and pain, so much pain. She blinked and saw an almost full moon shining through the window. Her mouth was dry, and her hands ached.

She stirred and suddenly noticed she was not alone in the bed. Cailean was lying next to her. He must have sensed her movement because he opened his eyes and pulled her to him. "Go back to sleep," he murmured.

She hesitated, then let herself sink against his chest and closed her eyes. His shirt smelled like burnt wood, but underneath was his familiar scent. He embraced her and pulled her closer. Under her cheek, she felt his steady, soothing heartbeat, and moments later, she slipped back to sleep.

When she next awoke, it was light, and Cailean was gone. Allison straightened up and rubbed her eyes. It was still early in the morning.

She startled when the door suddenly opened. But it was Rhona, not Cailean, carrying a tray with something to eat and drink.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I don't know exactly," Allison said. "How long was I asleep?"

"A whole day and a night. We were starting to worry about you."

"Really?"

Allison began to wonder then if she had only dreamed about Cailean. And not just that he had been lying next to her that night, but that he had loved her.

Rhona set the tray down. "It's going to be a tiring journey for you, and it would be good eat and drink something before you set out."

Allison sensed how hungry she was and gratefully reached for the bowl of oatmeal sweetened with honey.

"Come down when you're finished. You probably don't have to pack much, do you?"

Allison swallowed and shook her head. It seemed equally unreal to her that she would be leaving today. But it was what she wanted.

"Ian is already waiting in the courtyard."

Allison opened her mouth and closed it again. Rhona must not know anything about Cailean wanting to bring her. Or maybe it never

happened, and she had just imagined it.

"Allison?" asked Rhona now.

"Yes?"

"Thank you for helping me with the fire. I don't know what I would have done without your help."

Allison managed a smile. "You're welcome."

Rhona returned her smile and closed the door behind her.

Allison finished her meal and then dawdled around some a bit, hoping Cailean would come to her room. But eventually, she could no longer delay the inevitable.

At the door of the room, she stopped and took one last look at the bed. She would never forget this room and what she had experienced here.

Sure enough, Ian was standing by in the yard with two horses, and when Allison saw Cailean standing next to him with a frown on his face, her heart beat a little faster. The next moment, Allison understood why Cailean was scowling. Rhona was standing next to him with her hands on her hips.

Malcolm stepped out into the open behind Allison and muttered, "Are they fighting again?"

Allison glanced at him, and to her surprise, Malcolm winked at her.

"It's time for you both to get going, or they're going to start banging their heads together."

When Cailean caught sight of Allison on the stairs, he merely nodded gravely. Then, turning to Ian, he said, "You can unpack your things again."

"No, you won't, Ian," Rhona said. "You're going to take Allison to Dundarg."

Hesitantly, Allison stopped. Malcolm stayed beside her.

Cailean shook his head. "I'm going to go with Allison, and that's my final decision. You can't stop me."

Rhona pressed her lips together so tightly they turned white. "You're just making yourself miserable, Cailean. Say goodbye here."

"I decide for myself when and how to make myself miserable. I will accompany her."

"But you know very well you can't marry her. Why don't you understand that?" Rhona sounded almost desperate.

Allison gasped, and Cailean flinched. He gave Allison a quick look, then turned back to Rhona. "Yes, I know that, sister. But it's not because you have other plans for my future, it's because she wants to return home. And as you know, I can't accompany her there. I respect that decision, even if I would have wished it otherwise."

Allison's stomach fluttered so much she put her hand over it.

Rhona stared at him open-mouthed. "You asked her to be your wife?"

Cailean pressed his lips together, and Allison wanted to run away. "I did. And I know you don't like it, but I don't care. Just like you didn't care when you got involved with Malcolm." He glanced at Malcolm, who was still standing halfway behind Allison. "No offense, brother-in-law."

He raised his hand and shook his head. Apparently, an alliance had already formed between the two men.

"But my marriage to Malcolm is good for us and our plans, you should be happy about that."

"I have become that, Rhona."

She wanted to say something, but he raised his hand.

"You, of all people, should know that you can't help the way you feel."

Again he looked at Allison, and she felt as if her legs would give out. She had known he had feelings for her, but for him to say it so openly in front of everyone nearly pulled the rug out from under her.

"I'm taking Allison back to Dundarg, and then I'll come back, and we'll talk about everything. But at least give me a chance to say goodbye." He took a deep breath. "Besides, I promised to protect her. I owe it to her to make sure she gets home safely. And so do you, for that matter."

Rhona's hand went to her neck, where the amulet used to be. It was safely in Allison's hand. She lowered her head. "How about you and Ian accompany her together?"

"No," Cailean and Ian said in unison. Allison exhaled with relief.

Rhona glanced at Malcolm, who gave her a reassuring nod. Then she gave up. "All right."

Cailean just nodded. Allison knew he wouldn't have let Rhona dissuade him anyway, and she was grateful for that. "I'll be back in ten days. Malcolm knows about it. We'll talk then."

He glanced at the other man, and Allison felt a warning tingle in the pit of her stomach. Why had Cailean emphasized that so much?

Rhona sighed. "Then I'll see you in ten days." She hesitated, and suddenly her cheeks turn red. "Can I ask you one more thing?"

"What?" asked Cailean, not sounding very happy.

"Can you bring me a few things? My departure from our house a few weeks ago was a bit rushed."

The corner of Cailean's mouth twitched. "If I must."

A short time later, when the siblings had exchanged all the important information and Allison had said goodbye to Ian and Malcolm, she stepped up to Rhona. The other woman eyed her seriously, then took Allison's hands. "I really like you," she said, "and I

wish things were so that you could be my sister. You have to believe that."

Allison smiled and could sense Rhona's sincerity. "But they just aren't."

Rhona nodded. "I wish you a good journey, wherever it may take you. And I thank you for everything."

"Thank you, too."

She wrapped Rhona in her arms and hugged her. For a very brief moment, she wished they could see each other again, but she knew that wouldn't happen.

Then she sat up, and without a backward glance, she and Cailean left the castle. The smell of the fire still hanging in the air.

They rode in silence through the morning, as Allison was trying to collect herself, and presumably, Cailean was also. She still couldn't believe he had told Rhona he wanted to marry her. No man had ever said that before, and so far, she had been glad of it because she had never wanted to marry any other man. She had always loved her freedom far too much for that. But with Cailean, for some reason, it was different. But maybe that was because of this special situation and the fact that she was much more dependent on him than she would have been on any man in her time.

She didn't dare search in her heart whether she might also want to marry him because what would that mean? What would she do then? She tried not to ask herself those questions.

She struggled to turn her thoughts toward Caitrin, Lauren, and Jenna and what she would tell them when she returned home. But her mind kept focusing on what she would tell them about Cailean. Lauren would probably find the whole story romantic, Caitrin, on the other hand, would look at her with a "Didn't I tell you?" look, and Jenna would smile knowingly because she had found Evan, the man who meant everything to her.

Allison tried not to compare what was between her and Cailean to what Jenna and Evan had; after all, they were getting married and could hardly keep their hands off each other. When they were in the same room, you could literally feel how deeply they were connected.

As thoughts of her friends kept sending her back to Cailean, she turned to something else, thinking of all the 21st-century comforts she missed so much. Coffee, for example, a hot shower whenever she wanted it. Electricity she appreciated much more now, especially that you could turn on a light just by flipping a switch. The internet and telephones. Soft beds, medications, security. The list was endless. But when she thought about Daniel Walden, in prison but still directing his henchmen to stalk her, she wasn't so sure she should leave security on the list. One century appeared to be equal to the other. Daniel there, Hamish here.

She gazed at Cailean's broad back on the horse in front of her and wondered what he was thinking. And she longed for him, so much it almost hurt. It was strange being so close to him and alone with him, but not talking. She wondered if that would change by the time they arrived at Dundarg. After all, it was three days.

Her stomach fluttered. In three days, she would be able to return home. For three more days, she would be alone with Cailean, and then she would never see him again.

She aggressively pushed that thought aside. It was not yet time.

She still wanted to ask him so many things. Now that he knew where she came from, she could ask him all kinds of questions about this time and the people. There was no better opportunity, but he didn't even turn around to talk to her.

They stopped for a rest shortly after noon, and Cailean retrieved bread and a flask with water from his saddlebag. Allison strolled down to a stream and washed her hands and face. Although it had stormed two days ago, it was already dry again.

She felt Cailean's gaze on her and slowly walked back. She sat down next to him and took a piece of the bread. "How long will we be on the road?" She knew, but she had to say something to get the conversation going.

He took a deep breath. "Same as on the way there. Three days, probably. We won't be riding at night and resting during the day this time, though."

Allison nodded and bit her lip. She hadn't thought about the nights at all. She wondered how that would turn out.

His eyes fell on her neck, and he raised his eyebrows. "Where is the amulet?"

Allison opened her hand and showed it to him. "Here."

"You're carrying it in your hand?"

"I'm afraid of losing it."

"But that could be very uncomfortable if we ride for three days."

Allison had already noticed that, too. The corners of the jewelry dug uncomfortably into her palm. Not to mention the tingling sensation that was always stronger on her hand than anywhere else on her skin.

"Come here," he said. "I'll tie it around you."

Allison hesitated, then handed it to him. She turned around and lifted her hair. She heard him take a deep breath, then put the leather strap around her neck and fastened it with a knot.

"I think it's better this way," he said, taking a drink from the flask.

Disappointed, Allison let her hair down. For some reason, she had hoped he would kiss the back of her neck. But he had himself well in hand.

She glanced at him. He looked stubbornly straight ahead but then apparently gave himself a jolt and turned to her. "We'll be fine," he said, and she wondered if he was simply trying to strengthen his resolve. She could use some, too.

Her eyes fell on the sword by his side. "Did Malcolm give it back to you?"

He nodded. "Yes, as early as the second day. I think he realized I was angry more at Rhona than at him."

"So, you're getting along better now?"

He shrugged. "I suppose so. He's not a bad guy. But sometimes old enmities just get in the way."

"Between your clans?"

He nodded. "It is said that my great-great-grandfather told the then Laird of the Grants that all his cows were prettier than his daughters. He resented that very much. Unfortunately, my great-grandfather took one of these daughters as his wife. Against my grandfather's will, of course. And it was said that she was very beautiful, and my great-great-grandfather was impressed by her charm. Still, he never apologized, and this resulted in years of tension between the two clans."

Allison had to laugh, and Cailean's eyes sparkled, too. Then he became serious. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," she replied.

"How is it during your time? Do these feuds between the clans still exist, or are we succeeding in our efforts?"

Allison thought, then shook her head. "There are no more feuds in that form, especially not such bloody ones. But clans also don't exist anymore today."

He looked at her in amazement. "Why not? How do people live then?"

Allison shrugged. "In much smaller family groups. More like you with Rhona and your grandmother."

"But that also must mean there aren't any more bloody confrontations?"

Allison sighed and thought about all the many wars over the years. At the beginning of her career, she had wanted to travel to report from war zones, but they had never let her. The reasoning had never been official but always subliminal that she was a woman. At the time, she had been very upset about this form of discrimination. Today, she was grateful not to have gone because quite a few journalists returned with war trauma.

"It's a long story," she said.

"Will you tell it to me on the way?" he asked.

Allison nodded, and as soon as they were back on the horses, she

reported as best she could about how these conflicts were no longer local or regional but between countries. She couldn't help but mention the large ships, automatic weapons, and aircraft, because of course, Cailean was asking all kinds of questions. He seemed fascinated that people were traveling so far from home to wage war.

Allison felt guilty not knowing whether there was some kind of etiquette among time travelers not to tell such things. But surely, Caitrin would have pointed this rule out to her. And somehow, she felt that she owed Cailean something for protecting and freeing her. Knowledge was good currency for him. Again and again, he stopped his horse, staring at her, spellbound, while she tried to explain with gestures how certain things looked.

When they were resting again, Cailean realized they hadn't actually gotten very far. "Maybe I should stop storytelling," Allison suggested.

Horried, Cailean shook his head. "No." Allison couldn't blame him. If she were to meet someone from the future, she would want to know everything, too.

Cailean took a deep gulp from the flask, still shaking his head in bewilderment. At that moment, Allison longed so much to touch him. She wanted to find a way to make it seem accidental so he wouldn't notice how much she enjoyed touching him. She remembered the ride from Dundarg to Freuchie Castle and how pleasant it had been to sit in front of him in the saddle. They had touched constantly, and she had felt so safe.

Suddenly she had an idea, but it took her a moment before she dared to say anything. "I think my horse is lame, by the way."

Cailean lowered the water hose and looked at her in surprise. "Really?"

Allison nodded, her heart pounding.

"I didn't see anything earlier," he said, walking over to the brown stallion.

Allison followed him. "I did though, I felt it exactly. Maybe it would be better if I stopped riding him."

"But..." Cailean began and then broke off, beginning to understand. They both knew the decision was now his. He could pretend that the bay really was lame or assure her that she could continue riding him. It took almost an eternity for his answer. Finally, he nodded. "Maybe it would be better for you to ride on my horse with me. At least for the rest of the day. And tomorrow, we'll see how he's doing." He patted Allison's horse's neck.

"That's a good idea," she said with relief and couldn't help smiling.

A little later, Cailean lifted her in front of him into the saddle. Immediately, Allison swung her leg over the horse's mane and leaned

against him. It was so familiar and strange at the same time, perhaps because they had had sex in the meantime. She felt his heart beating and wondered if, like hers, it was beating faster than usual.

Slowly they started moving again. "Are you okay like this?" he asked softly, and she enjoyed feeling his breath on her ear.

"Yes. You too?"

He pulled her a little closer so that her back was touching his body. "That's better."

Allison smiled and leaned her head against his chest.

"There's just one more thing," he said.

"What?"

"What will you live on when people no longer have their own fields and animals?"

Allison sat down and began answering his seemingly endless barrage of questions.

They rode into the evening, then rested. Cailean lit a fire and prepared some food for them. Then he extinguished the flames, and they wrapped themselves in his plaid to lie down to rest in the shelter of a large rock. Although he was close behind her, holding her in his arms, he didn't try to kiss her or touch her in a way that could lead to sex. But Allison wasn't disappointed, just being together felt good. She didn't need sex to feel good with him. Besides, she had been the one to tell him they couldn't have sex again. She was grateful that he was sticking to that.

The next morning, she was surprised to find that she had slept soundly. Cailean, too, appeared rested. A small wrinkle appeared on his forehead, however, when he asked her if she thought her horse was still lame.

Allison looked at the brown stallion and nodded. "I think so."

"Can you stand another day with me on a horse?"

Allison smiled. "If you don't mind me asking you a few more questions, too, yes."

"Anything you want," he replied, giving her a long look that made her cheeks burn. Quickly, she turned away and continued to the small stream to bathe.

They spent that day together in the saddle as well, and this time, Allison learned quite a bit about this time period. She found that Cailean was quite worldly, and apparently, was very observant as well. He was very knowledgeable on many topics and answered all the questions she had.

When she asked why Ian and the other two men were afraid of him, Cailean laughed. "There is a story about me that seems to circulate among some clans. Yet, it's not even true. Or at least only half true. I'm said to have incredible speed with weapons because I

once disarmed someone who was considered invincible."

"And why is the story only half true?" asked Allison, leaning her head against his chest. She liked to feel the vibration of his chest while he talked.

"Because the only reason I was able to disarm him was because he was far too easily distracted. He had a lot of strength but wasn't very smart. It was too easy to anger him with words which made him stop paying attention to his weapons."

For some silly reason, Allison was proud of Cailean.

They spent the evening the same as before, and the next day they noticed that Allison's horse was still lame. She caught herself wishing they could go on riding like this forever but sensed from Cailean's tension that they were approaching Dundarg, even though he tried to hide it from her.

And indeed, on the third day, when the sun had already disappeared behind the horizon, Allison saw a familiar outline in the distance. Dundarg Castle. Her heart leapt out of her chest, and suddenly she felt nauseous. "We'll be there soon," she whispered.

Cailean, who had been silent for the past hour, took a deep breath. "Aye, that we will."

"Oh," was all Allison said, reaching for her amulet. The tingling was even stronger, and she hastily lowered her hand.

Cailean hugged her tighter. "We can do this," he said softly.

"I know," Allison murmured. But she wasn't really quite so sure.

Now, she also began to recognize the rock formations of the hills she had seen so often from Caitrin's house or on the car rides in the area.

"How should we do it?" she asked quietly.

It took Cailean a long time to answer, and she was already wondering if he had even heard her question when he said, "I'll take you to our house. There's no one there, and we can put the horses under cover." He took a deep breath. "Then I'll take you to the stone. Rhona explained to me where it is."

Allison just nodded, wondering how much longer it would be before they reached his grandmother's house. How much longer did she have with him? And how on earth was she going to say goodbye to him? Already she felt miserable.

Suddenly she became clearly aware of his presence behind her. She sensed him with every fiber of her body. Almost as if they were lying together in bed. Yet it was not lust or desire, but pure longing. Deep longing. She missed him already.

This thought scared her immensely, and she grabbed his hand and clung on to it. He lowered his head and kissed her gently on the hair.

Allison closed her eyes and tried to think of the stone. She had

been looking for it since she arrived here. It was all she wanted. Her entire life lay behind that stone. It was where she belonged.

But a voice inside her asked if Cailean was also not a part of her life. Her chest tightened painfully, she knew that the voice was right but didn't want to admit it.

She couldn't just stay here. This was not a place where she wanted to live. She imagined herself back at Caitrin's house, hearing Jenna's familiar laughter and eating Lauren's delicious food. But what would it be like if her heart was still here, the voice asked? Would her life still feel right and good in the 21st century? She guessed the answer was no, but she didn't want to hear it.

What would life be like without Cailean? A life where she could only remember him but would no longer be in his arms? A life where she could only remember his questions but no longer answered any new ones? A life where she would never be touched by him again?

She tried to imagine what her future might be like when she went home. Would she ever fall in love again? Was that even possible when one's heart had been given away in another time? She thought of Caitrin and how she had only ever loved one man, even after she had thought he died. Allison had never seen Caitrin with a man, and only for the past several months, Allison had known why. There had been only the one for her. She had given her heart away in another time.

As the horse trotted on and on toward the stone, Allison tried to convince herself that it was different for her and Cailean, but the voice inside her grew louder with each step they took toward the stone. And it was telling her that Cailean was to her what Evan was to Jenna and Finlay was to Caitrin.

This thought shook her deeply, and yet, on the other hand, everything seemed to fall into place. She sighed with relief, although she still didn't know what to do.

Cailean wrapped his arms around her tighter but said nothing. Although she couldn't see his face, she felt a struggle raging inside him as well.

A roof appeared in the distance among the trees, and she felt panic rising inside her. She had to make a decision. Right now. But she could not.

Suddenly Cailean reined in the horse and took a deep breath. "Here it is," he said, his voice sounding stressed.

Allison turned her head. "What's here?" But actually, she already knew. She felt as if the amulet on her neck was beginning to glow.

"The stone."

"Cailean..." she said weakly, turning her head to rest her face against his neck.

"I know I said we'd bring the horses to the house first. But I'm not

sure if..." he took a deep breath, "if I would be able to do it then."

And at that moment, she knew what she wanted. She wanted him. The fact that he was willing to let her go, and brought her to the stone even though it hurt him so much, told her that he was the man she wanted to be with. He would give her all the freedom she needed while respecting all her boundaries. He would never lock her up, and she could trust him unconditionally.

"Cailean," she said, her voice almost breaking, "I don't want to go."

"Allison." He sounded agonized.

"Let me stay with you."

She felt him abruptly tense up. His entire body was taut like a bow. Oh God, didn't he want her? Had he decided against her while she had been thinking about whether she wanted to stay?

"I know it's unexpected, but I—" she said, but he interrupted her.

"Get off," he said hastily.

"What?"

"Get off. Quickly."

"But...", Allison said, looking at him in confusion.

"Hurry up." He almost pulled her out of the saddle.

"What's wrong?"

"Go to the stone. Quickly. And promise me you'll get out of here. Now."

"But why?"

"Promise me, Allison. Go to the stone and walk away. But hurry."

He pushed her off the horse, she was not prepared for that and hit the ground. With difficulty she stood up and stared at him. What had gotten into him?

"Cailean, I..."

"Now. Get going," he shouted, looking so angry that Allison recoiled.

At that same moment, she heard hoof beats and voices. Cailean spurred his horse in the flank and it neighed indignantly.

"Go, Allison, please go. At least get to the trees. Hide."

But she stood on the path and could not move. Stunned, she watched as he let go of the reins of her bay and continued to spur his horse. It neighed once more and jerked its head up, and then started moving.

Then Allison realized what he had said. She should hide, but why?

Behind her, she heard hoofbeats, and when she looked around, she saw a group of riders appear at the end of the path. Two were carrying bows, and one was already loading an arrow, two had drawn their swords. And one of those two was Hamish.

Cailean had also drawn his sword, but instead of fleeing, he rode toward them. And now Allison finally understood what he had meant.

She turned and raced into the bushes, branches hit her in the face and she fell over a tree root. She scrambled to her feet as she heard shouting and the clang of metal on metal. She felt a chill. They were actually fighting. Cailean had no chance against four men, yet he faced them.

It puzzled her as to why Hamish was attacking Cailean. But then she understood. He had disappeared with her, and Hamish must have believed that Cailean had betrayed him. A breach of faith he had been waiting for for a long time. Yet the reality was quite different. Then she remembered that Malcolm had said that he had sent Hamish a reply. He had assumed that the latter knew about him and Rhona. Hamish was certainly furious.

Her fear for Cailean almost paralyzed her. She heard shouting and the sounds of fighting. Dazed, she picked herself up and stumbled back toward the edge of the grove. When she got there, she was confronted with a horrible scene. Several horses were running loose, startled. Four men were standing, one holding his sword straight, and another picking up a dagger from the ground. A third, Hamish, pointed his sword toward the ground.

But where was Cailean?

It took a moment for Allison to realize that Hamish wasn't pointing his sword at the ground at all, but was holding it to Cailean's neck. Cailean was lying on the ground.

"Where is she?" cried Hamish, and involuntarily Allison withdrew deeper among the trees.

Cailean must have answered something because Hamish kicked him with his foot. "Don't lie to me."

Allison pressed a hand in front of her mouth as Hamish lunged again, and Cailean kicked again. She had to help him, but how?

Suddenly Hamish gave a hand command to the others, and Angus and another man pulled Cailean to his feet. Allison froze when she saw that his shirt was soaked with blood. He was injured.

She watched helplessly as the men tied his hands and feet and then placed him over his horse. Cailean looked pale, and Allison was not sure if he was still conscious.

And before she could move or even decide what to do, they were gone.

As the hoofbeats faded in the distance, Allison's knees gave way beneath her. She sank down and began sobbing so hard that her whole body ached.

What could she do? Cailean had been injured and captured. And Hamish was angry with him. She knew herself what happened when this man flew into a rage.

She felt like a traitor for not helping Cailean. She had simply stood by impassively and watched as the man she loved had been hurt.

Now she understood that he had sensed them coming. That's why he had forced her to dismount her horse and demanded she go to the stone. Not because he didn't want her anymore, but because he had wanted to protect her.

She turned around indecisively. The amulet told her that the stone must be near, by now, it was tingling so much it was more like an electric shock. But surely, she couldn't leave if Cailean was hurt and trapped. She had to help him.

She took a step in the direction of the path. By now, dusk was so far gone that she couldn't make out much. Heavens, she didn't even know where the castle was. Even from Cailean's grandmother's house, she wouldn't be able to find her way back.

Where should she go? And how could she free Cailean? Was he even still alive or was he too badly injured?

This thought made her gasp and she sank to her knees, unable to move. But then she remembered the stone and all that lay behind it, and a thought formed inside her. She would do as Cailean had said and travel home. But only to get help. The others would know what to do. At least then she could get medicine and maybe a gun to free Cailean. The stone would help her.

She struggled to her feet and staggered between the trees. Again and again, branches hit her face and her dress caught in brambles. But she felt she was getting closer and closer to the gate. An invisible power seemed to be guiding her.

Finally, she saw it. It was indeed lying in a small clearing and

water was bubbling nearby, perhaps from a spring, just as Rhona had said.

Rhona. The thought of Cailean's sister gave Allison pause. Should she go to her after all? She, too, would do everything in her power to help Cailean. And she had Malcolm who would help her. Malcolm, who had an entire clan he commanded. But how long would it take to get Rhona and Malcolm? At least three days one way and another three days back. Six days, that was far too long. Hamish could do who knows what to Cailean by then.

No, she would be able to find help faster at home, even if no one else could come with her.

The stone was so familiar and yet so foreign. With trembling fingers, Allison untied the leather strap from her neck, and the memory of the moment Cailean had put it on her caused her such pain she had to take a breath. How foolish she had been not to think about what danger awaited Cailean here. She wondered if he knew what could happen. She was sure he had considered it. And he had brought her anyway, so that she would arrive here safely.

She finally managed to loosen the leather strap. Her fingers trembled and she dropped the amulet. Cursing, she groped around in the grass until she found it.

She didn't have to look long to find the notch on the stone. She pressed the amulet onto the symbol and placed both hands on it. She felt dizzy and the forest around her began to spin. Allison gasped and fought the desire to let go. It wasn't a nice feeling, but it would take her where she wanted to go.

She thought of Jenna, Caitrin, and Lauren and closed her eyes. Then she gave in and fell into the bottomless pit.

She felt damp grass under her cheek and wet from above. It was raining, and she was lying on the ground. Allison struggled to stand up and looked around, but she couldn't see anything. Everything was dark. Her head was throbbing, and her entire body ached.

The air smelled different, but maybe that was from the rain. Had it worked?

Slowly she rose and bumped her head on a branch. Then she caught sight of a light between the trees. It took her a moment to realize that it was not from a fire or a torch but from a very bright light that could only be electric.

She sank back to her knees and sobbed with relief. It had actually worked. Then she rose and took the first step toward the light. Now she had a better view. The path was in front of her and she could see the table and chairs over on Caitrin's garden terrace. The light was from her house.

She took the next step, then another, and the next second was

running. She gathered her skirts and ran as fast as she could. The sooner she could find everything she needed, the sooner she could return.

When she reached the terrace, she sobbed. Inside, she saw movement in the living room. She squinted her eyes and saw two people sitting on the sofa, tightly embraced and kissing. Jenna and Evan.

She rushed to the door and knocked, then leaned her head against it and took a deep breath.

Jenna and Evan stared at the door, startled.

"Allison!" Jenna yelled.

Evan was first to his feet and in a few steps was at the door. He opened it and Allison stumbled in. The warmth that hit her was unfamiliar and the light blinded her.

Evan caught her by the arm. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Jenna was quickly beside her and wrapped her arms around Allison. "You're back! Oh God, we were so worried."

But Allison didn't have time for that. "Evan, where are your medical supplies? I need them. Quickly."

He gazed at her warily. "Why? Are you hurt?" His eyes wandered over her, but quickly realized she was uninjured. "Did you bring someone with you? Do you want me to go out?"

Allison shook her head. "No, I have to take it with me. Quickly."

"Slow down, honey," Evan said, leading her over to the table. "Sit down first."

But Allison didn't want to sit down and shook off his arm. "I can't stay long."

"You want to go back?" Jenna asked, horrified.

Allison nodded. "I have to. I have to help him."

Jenna and Evan exchanged a look. "Tell me in order, and I'll know better how to help you," Evan said. "And in the meantime, let's see about getting you dry. Too much hurry won't help right now."

Allison wrung her hands. "But he's hurt, and I don't know how badly."

"And who is he?" asked Jenna cautiously.

Before Allison could reply, Evan said, "Maybe you should get Caitrin and Lauren."

Jenna blinked in confusion, then turned on her heel and ran to the back of the house.

Evan knelt beside Allison and eyed her. "These are just scratches," he noted, pointing to her arms.

She nodded. "Blackberries."

"May I take off the plaid?"

Allison looked at him in confusion and then down at herself. Only

then did she notice that she was still wearing Cailean's plaid, which he had wrapped around her when they were still riding the horse. It was after the sun had just disappeared behind the hills, and it had suddenly become chilly. She had completely forgotten that she was still wearing it.

Her eyes filled with tears as she remembered that moment, which seemed like an eternity ago. And in fact, it was. It had been over four hundred years since Hamish had captured Cailean.

"Is it his?" asked Evan quietly.

She nodded, and a tear fell on the fabric.

"I just want to see if you're hurt."

Carefully he pulled the plaid from her shoulders.

At that moment, footsteps pounded on the stairs, and already Caitrin and Lauren were rushing into the living room. "Allison!" they shouted.

Lauren's slender arms wrapped around Allison's neck and her friend's soft hair brushed across her face. Allison closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This was exactly how she had imagined it all these weeks, and now it was finally a reality. But it didn't feel as wonderful as she had expected. Fear for Cailean was still roiling inside her.

Caitrin squatted on the floor and looked at her piercingly from her green eyes. "You're back," she said simply.

Allison nodded. "I'm so sorry I just left like that."

She looked over at Evan, who nodded. "I told them everything."

"Let's talk about it later," Caitrin said. "Right now, it's important that you settle in first. Are you okay?"

Allison shook her head and Caitrin looked alarmed.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not as far as I can see," Evan said, still holding the plaid.

Allison also shook her head.

"She wants to go right back," Jenna interjected.

"No," Lauren exclaimed. "You can't."

Caitrin, on the other hand, did not seem surprised. She took Allison's hands and squeezed them gently. "What happened?"

Allison found it difficult to find the right words, although this had always been one of her strengths throughout her life. She wasn't a journalist for nothing. And she wasn't sure whether she should tell the others that Hamish had put her in a dungeon for two weeks. They would never let her travel there again. But if she didn't return, what would become of Cailean?

She looked over at the plaid, and Evan, noticing her gaze, handed it back to her.

With a knowing expression, Caitrin's asked. "Do you want to go back because of him?"

Allison just nodded. Tears welling up inside her again. "I have to. He's hurt."

Caitrin raised her eyebrows. "Seriously?"

Allison nodded. "I think so. He was bleeding and unconscious."

"What caused the wound?" asked Evan, rising.

"A sword."

Someone took a sharp breath.

"Where exactly is he hurt?" continued Evan.

"I don't know. Somewhere here." She pointed to her chest.

"And how deep was the wound?"

Perplexed, Allison shrugged. She felt ashamed that she had so little information for Evan. "They fought, then he was on the ground, bleeding. They tied him up and placed him on a horse."

She saw Caitrin and Evan exchange a glance. Alarmed, she asked, "What does that mean? Why are you looking at each other like that?"

She didn't find it reassuring at all when doctors exchanged glances. It was as if they were talking wordlessly about who should give the patient the bad news.

Caitrin squeezed her hands again. "It doesn't have to mean anything, but we don't know that for sure. If he was on the ground with a wound, it could be infected. And if he was laid upside down over a horse with a wound to his torso, he may have lost a lot of blood. Was there a lot of blood?"

Alison shrugged again. "Yes. No. So this much." She made a circle on her chest to indicate the extent of the bloodstain.

"And did it come out of the wound in bumps?"

"I don't think so. But his shirt was all red."

Once again, Evan and Caitrin looked at each other.

"Damn it. Stop it," Allison snapped at them. "I'm going crazy with worry."

The corner of Caitrin's mouth twitched. "It's good to have you back, Allison."

She sat up. "So, what do you recommend to do? What can I bring to help him?"

Caitrin straightened up. "Where is he now?"

Allison raised her shoulders. "In the castle, I guess."

She did not mention that he was probably in the dungeon. Most likely then, the others would not let her return. But she shouldn't have bothered to try to hide it, because as usual, she had underestimated Jenna's logical thinking.

"But if they fought and he was tied up and put over a horse, they captured him. Can you just go to him that easily? Maybe he's in the dungeon."

Lauren moaned softly, but immediately put her hand over her

mouth.

Allison gritted her teeth and looked at Evan while she answered. She had a feeling he was the one most likely to understand. "Yes. But I know how to get there."

That was a lie, but she would not let anyone stop her from going back.

Evan nodded. He had indeed understood.

"Who exactly captured him?" asked Jenna. "The English?"

That's how it had been with Evan when Jenna had gone to him and freed him.

"What year were you actually in?" asked Lauren now.

Allison straightened her shoulders. "1589, and he was captured by the Laird of the Macleans, Hamish."

A thoughtful expression appeared on Caitrin's face. Apparently, she was going over the lists in her head.

"And who is he?" continued Lauren. "A Maclean, too?"

Fascinating how quickly they all got to the heart of the matter, Allison thought. She shook her head. It took her a moment to pronounce his name. "Cailean MacGilvie. He grew up with the Macleans, though, and with Hamish."

It felt strange to say his name here in this warm, safe room full of light. Her hand ran over the plaid and she would have liked to smell it, to absorb his scent. She needed to reassure herself that he had really existed.

It had become very quiet, and it took Allison a moment to realize that everyone was staring at her. Almost reverently, they stood there. "What is it?" she asked uneasily.

It was Lauren who stepped forward and hugged Allison tightly. "You've fallen in love," she said, "that's what's going on."

To her own surprise, a tear rolled down Allison's cheek. "I know," she whispered into Lauren's hair, catching Caitrin and Jenna's gaze. Neither of them were showing an "I told you so" look, just compassion and understanding. It was as if they could feel all the happiness and fear. And maybe they could.

Finally, Evan cleared his throat. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm going to start picking out meds and bandages right now. Because the way I figure it, no one's going to be able to stop Allison from going back."

So, he really had understood. She smiled gratefully at him.

Even Lauren was nodding now.

Caitrin took a deep breath. "Let's do it this way. Evan will gather the medical stuff, Lauren will take care of getting Allison warm and dry and fed again, and I'll work with Jenna to sift through whatever information we have and what else we can give you." She smiled at

Allison. "And while I know you want to return as soon as you can, you're not going tonight. It's way too dangerous."

Allison wanted to revolt, but Caitrin shook her head sternly. "And don't even think about trying to escape. This time it's really best if you allow us to make a plan together. Because then you'll know what to expect and how best to prepare."

Allison realized she was right. Going back in the middle of the night was not a good idea. Still, resistance stirred inside her. "And what if he's bled to death by then?"

Caitrin and Evan exchanged that look again, then both shook their heads. Evan said, "That's very unlikely. It doesn't sound like he's injured his aorta. And if he has, it's already unfortunately too late."

Everything inside Allison contracted.

"Evan," Jenna scolded him softly. "Don't be so serious. It scares her."

Evan bit his lip, but Caitrin jumped to his side. "He's right. If the injury is that severe, there's nothing Allison could do anyway. Even if she brought everything we have in the way of bandages. Only a blood transfusion and a surgeon would help in that case, and she has neither. We have to face that fact."

She stepped up to Allison and placed a hand on her shoulder. "But since the blood didn't come out of the wound in spurts but slowly soaked the shirt, it's probably just a cut. That's where the biggest risk is, that he'll get an infection, so we should treat him with antibiotics and maybe a tetanus shot. Also, the wound will need to be cleaned and dressed. You can do all that in the morning." She squeezed Allison's shoulder. "And to prepare for that, it's important that you get your strength back. That means you need some good food, a hot bath, and preferably sleep if you can."

"I can't sleep," Allison said, but the other things all sounded perfect.

"As I said, only if you can. If not, you'll just have longer to tell us everything. I still have a few questions. But first, let's see about getting your strength back."

"Right," Lauren said. "Jenna, how about you take Allison to the bathroom, and I'll make some soup in the meantime? Or do you need to speak with her urgently, Caitrin?"

Everyone looked at Lauren in amazement. She had never taken the lead before.

Caitrin smiled and shook her head. "This is exactly how a gatekeeper should behave."

A shadow flitted across Lauren's face, and suddenly Allison was curious. She wanted to know what had happened here in the past few weeks. But that would have to wait until after a shower.

Slowly she rose and was surprised to find how weak her legs were. As she swayed and held on to the table, the hands of her three friends were immediately there to hold her.

Allison took a deep breath. She had known she could count on the others. "Lauren?" she asked, "can I ask you one more thing?"

"Anything."

"Can you make me a coffee? Preferably a couple of liters."

"But not too much," Caitrin protested, "It might weaken you."

Allison didn't believe that, but she didn't say anything. The main thing was that she could drink coffee again. She didn't care about anything else.

It was the hour before dawn, the darkest hour, when Allison awoke from a short nap. Caitrin had encouraged her to try to sleep, and although Allison hadn't thought she could, she must have dozed off briefly. She was lying on the sofa holding Cailean's plaid in her arms. It smelled of his scent and filled her with a deep longing.

Allison sat up and noticed that the others were still there. Caitrin was asleep in the chair, Jenna was snuggled up against Evan. He was holding a tablet and apparently still searching the internet for more information to give to Allison. Lauren, though, was sitting upright next to her on the sofa watching her.

They smiled at each other and Lauren reached for her hand. "I can't believe you're leaving so soon."

Allison stretched. She couldn't quite believe it either, but on the other hand, she couldn't wait, worry about Cailean was flowing through her mind and heart continuously. But she felt strong enough now to tackle the task at hand. Caitrin and Evan were confident that she would be able to manage caring for Cailean. Evan had explained in great detail everything she should do when she found Cailean, and had handed her a woolen bag filled with all sorts of bandages and medicines. That alone had been a relief.

Lauren had provided her with fortifying food and plenty of coffee. Allison had not taken a bath, but had showered twice. Not only did the bath remind her too much of Cailean, but she had actually always preferred showers. Warm water running over her body was an incredible feeling of luxury.

Caitrin had referenced her lists and explained to Allison that she had very little record of who had been the gatekeeper during that time. Beginning with the year 1598, Ila Maclean was listed. Allison thought of her and Rhona. So Rhona's plan must have worked.

In return, she had told Caitrin everything she knew about Cailean's grandmother and Rhona. And she had promised to fill in the information gap in Caitrin's records when it was all over.

Jenna, who had listened with interest the whole time, as had

Lauren, had looked again in the history books and told Allison that Malcolm Grant had indeed married a Rhona in 1589 and that the two had had several children together. That news had filled Allison with deep joy since they were no longer just names in a book to her. She remembered clearly Rhona's hug goodbye and Malcolm's dry remarks. The two had become real people to her.

However, she didn't dare ask Jenna if she had also found out anything about Cailean. If it said that he had married a Cameron, she wouldn't have known what to do. And if there was nothing about him there at all, it was possible that he had died without leaving any children or any trace.

She sat up and Lauren looked at her questioningly. "Do you want me to make you something else to eat? I baked that lemon cake you like so much. Why don't you take a look at it?"

Allison almost declined, but for some reason felt that Lauren wanted her to go into the kitchen with her. So she nodded.

The cake actually did look delicious and Allison ate a piece even though she was full. Who knew when she might come back to something like this in the future.

Lauren leaned against the counter, watching Allison thoughtfully. "What's it like?" she blurted out suddenly.

Allison knew exactly what she meant, yet the question surprised her. "Why do you ask?"

Lauren looked down at her feet and didn't answer.

Allison raised her eyebrows. "You want to go, too," she said slowly.

Her friend chewed on her lower lip. "I'm not sure. After all, I promised Caitrin I'd be the gatekeeper. I can't just abandon her, can I?"

"What changed your mind?" asked Allison, shoving a piece of the cake into her mouth. The last time she had seen Lauren, she had made it very clear that she would never travel.

Her friend folded her arms. "All of you."

"Us? How so?"

Lauren nodded. "Do you remember Caitrin saying that you can probably only travel when there's someone in that other time that's meant for you?"

Allison nodded. At the time, she hadn't believed it for a second. But now, things were different.

"I want that too," Lauren blurted out. "You're all so happy, and I want that too."

Allison frowned. "As far as I know, only one of us is really happy. And that's Jenna."

"But the way you and Caitrin talk about these men, it's so...", she made an impatient gesture, "so touching and deep and loving. I want

to have those feelings for someone, too. And since I can travel, it's probably true that there's someone out there for me. What if he's waiting for me somewhere? What if we miss each other just because I'm afraid to go?"

She sounded so distressed that Allison set the plate aside, walked over to her, and gave her a hug. She knew what Lauren meant, because thoughts of Jenna and Evan and the way Caitrin had spoken of Finlay had been one reason she had decided to stay with Cailean. Still, she wasn't sure Lauren was going about it the right way.

"And what if you travel and don't find him? After all, Caitrin said no one really knows why people can travel."

Lauren's arms tensed. "But then at least I would have tried."

Allison smiled and looked into her friend's eyes. "When did you get so brave?"

She liked the new Lauren.

"I'm not brave," she said. "I'm scared to death of it. But now I've seen it work for you, and I need to try it."

"Then prepare yourself better than I did," Allison said. "And listen to everything Caitrin tells you."

Lauren smiled. "Am I hearing you right?"

"You better not tell her I said that."

They exchanged a conspiratorial glance and Allison took her plate again. The night sky was starting to lighten, and she would be leaving soon. Her stomach rebelled a little.

Lauren was already chewing on her lower lip again.

Allison shoved another piece of cake into her mouth. "What else?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Lauren reprimanded her.

She rolled her eyes. "Now tell me."

"How did you know it was him? Did you recognize him right away? Did he recognize you?"

Allison lowered her fork and thought. Finally, she shrugged. "I didn't believe for even a second what Caitrin said about love, that's why I didn't go looking for him. And most likely, we just fell in love with each other, as one does. But we've also been through a lot together, so it was only natural."

Lauren frowned. "Was it really just that? Like you meet someone here for a date and it slowly turns into something more? That sounds so unromantic."

Allison stared out the window into the darkness, where a few trees were slowly starting to appear. Later, when it was light, she would be able to see the castle from here. The spot where she had met Cailean four hundred years ago.

Maybe it had been different. Had they possibly recognized each other right away? She remembered Cailean telling her how fascinating

he had found her from the beginning, and she herself had trusted him from the first moment, although she couldn't say why.

She looked at Lauren. "Actually, why are you even asking all this?"

She was chewing on her lower lip again. Sometimes her friend was so transparent. "Because I think I already know who he might be."

Now Allison was totally surprised. "Really? And who is he?"

Lauren covered her face with her hands. "You're going to laugh at me," she said.

Allison shook her head. "After what I've been through, I couldn't laugh at anyone anymore."

That seemed to give Lauren more confidence. She took a deep breath. "Remember when we were in tenth grade and we went on that field trip and visited that castle?"

Astonished, Allison looked at her friend. "I don't think so, no."

"Yes, you do. That was the trip when you got drunk with Margareth."

"Oh, *that* field trip."

"That's the one. Well, there were seemingly endless pictures in that castle. Surely, you remember that. And there was a specific portrait there that fascinated me very much. You had to drag me away from it at the end."

Allison raised her eyebrows. "That's happened more than once."

No one had been surprised when Lauren decided to study art history and graphic design. After all, she had spent most of her free time in galleries and museums and had crammed her entire room at boarding school with huge volumes of art.

Lauren nodded. "But with this painting, it was different. Something about it drew me in, magically. And now I think I've figured out why."

"Now I'm intrigued."

"When I was coming back here from Edinburgh a couple of weeks ago, I stopped at Kinloch Castle because it had just been renovated, and the exhibit inside had been rehung."

"I see," Allison said, looking out the window again. An orange streak was already visible in the distance. She had to leave soon. Still, she was enjoying talking to Lauren. It was so normal and familiar, and she probably wouldn't see her for a long time. Besides, she felt like she could help her right now.

"And the portrait I had seen in that exhibition back in tenth grade was there. I don't even know how it got there. It just drew me to it almost magically." She swallowed. "I think the man in the portrait is the one I'm meant to be with. That's why that painting crossed my path again, right at this time. And that's why it fascinates me so much. It's almost as if I already have a relationship with this man."

Stunned, Allison stared at her. "Do you honestly believe that?"

Lauren nodded and her cheeks burned. On the one hand, she looked excited, and on the other, embarrassed. "It sounds totally stupid, doesn't it?"

Not long ago, Allison would have agreed it was pretty stupid. But since she had personally experienced that there were things between people no one could explain and that went deeper than anything words could describe, that type of thinking didn't occur to her anymore. So, she simply replied, "If you feel it's true, it must be true."

Lauren stared at her wide-eyed and suddenly began to cry.

"What is it?" asked Allison, startled. "Did I say something wrong?"

But Lauren shook her head. "On the contrary. I thought if anyone was going to stop me, it would be you."

Allison put the plate back down and wrapped Lauren in her arms again. "I would never stop you from finding happiness, and I hope that this man is indeed your happiness. However, I can't wholeheartedly encourage you to go, because even I was scared by this trip and all that awaited me there. I could well understand if you stayed here and didn't try."

Lauren gulped. "But I'm so drawn there."

"Then go," Allison said. "And if it's really awful, just come home."

"But what do I tell Caitrin?" Lauren asked.

Allison smiled. "Since I can only urge you to let her prepare you for the trip, you have to tell her something. Don't just leave."

"I would never do that."

"Good, and if anyone can understand why you're so drawn there, it's Caitrin. You'll find a way. The main thing is that you'll be happy."

Lauren wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "But I want her to be happy, too."

"I'm sure you'll be able to manage both. If it's possible for me to fall in love, then you'll all definitely find a way to be with your men."

They heard voices coming from the living room and the next moment Caitrin and Evan joined them.

"Don't tell her anything," Lauren whispered.

Allison shook her head. "I think I have to leave soon," she said instead, her heart racing at the thought.

"Well, I better wake Jenna up," Evan said, walking back into the living room.

The friends looked at each other ambivalently.

"Thank you for everything," Allison said. She noticed that no one had asked yet if and when she would return. She was grateful, because she didn't have an answer. But for some reason, she was sure they would meet again. Whenever and wherever that might be.

Jenna came into the kitchen, yawning, and looked out the window. "It's almost light out," she remarked. Then she crossed her arms and

looked pointedly at Lauren and Caitrin. "There's one more thing we need to talk about."

The other two nodded, and Allison started feeling a little queasy. "I don't know whether I'm coming back," she groaned.

Caitrin sighed. "That's not the point. We all know you can never predict something like that."

"Then what is it about?"

It was Jenna who answered. "Actually, we promised the police that we'd get back to them if you showed up."

Allison's heart sank. "Why?"

Caitrin shook her head. "We won't tell them anything useful, of course, but we had to pretend we were worried about you because we didn't know where you were."

"We were actually worried," Lauren said. "Just for a different reason."

"What happened?" asked Allison, her knees buckling. "Did Daniel do anything to put you all in danger? Did that Tom guy do anything?"

The other three exchanged a glance. Oh God, I hope nothing bad had happened, Allison thought. Only now did she realize that she hadn't even considered the fact that Tom might threaten the others if he didn't find her. How stupid had she been?

Jenna explained, "I think things are very different than you thought. Evan told us what happened, and the police only told us indirectly, but with the help of your editor, we put the whole puzzle together."

Allison was confused. She glanced out the window again. The sun would rise soon. And suddenly she wanted to go back even more.

"That Tom, he's the one who showed up here who you were running from, right?" said Jenna.

Allison nodded. "He's Daniel's stooge and does the dirty work for him."

Jenna shook her head. "No, he's not. He's a police officer working undercover, or was. He was trying to find evidence to convict this Daniel guy of a crime."

"Excuse me?" Allison had to hold onto the kitchen counter.

"You apparently beat him to it, though, when you turned in all that evidence. The police kept trying to reach you to let you know, but you just disappeared. Eventually, they tracked you down here. Tom was supposed to explain everything to you. And they also wanted to tell you that you were safe."

Allison wasn't sure whether to believe what her friends were saying. "But the housekeeper was actually murdered. By Daniel. It was reported in the paper."

Caitrin shook her head. "The police faked that, too. And they did it

in cooperation with several major newspapers. Including yours."

"But why?"

"Because Daniel was about to be released on bail, and they were worried that he was going to leave the country. They put out the word in the papers that his housekeeper was going to be a witness, and then Daniel ordered Tom to kill her. When he wanted to pay him afterwards, they had enough evidence."

Allison gasped, trying to make sense of it all. Even though she was so shocked, her mind was working fast. It all made sense and she knew it was the truth.

"The house keeper is fine?"

The others nodded. "She was in on it, too."

Allison ran her fingers through her hair. "So I escaped for no reason?" she asked.

Caitrin came over to her and took her hands. "The escape from here may have been in vain, but not the fact that you arrived there. A lot has changed for Cailean and the others because of you. It's good that you traveled there. I'm sure it was all meant to be."

Allison hugged Caitrin. "Thank you," she whispered in a teary voice. Then she went to Jenna and hugged her tightly, too. "I understand you so much better now," she said, and she felt Jenna smile.

Lauren was the last. "You're going to do everything right," Allison whispered. "I know it."

"Will we meet again?" her friend asked with a sob.

"Lauren," Caitrin and Jenna said in unison.

"I thought we discussed not asking that," Jenna added.

"Sorry," Lauren muttered. "I just miss her already."

Allison smiled through her tears. "I know we'll meet again. I'll come back and report."

Caitrin swallowed. "For that, though, you'll have to leave now. So, let's go."

The sun was just creeping over the horizon when Allison set off a little later. The bag with the medicine, the extra dress and shoes, as well as some matchboxes and other things she could put to good use, hung heavily over her shoulder.

Allison didn't turn around again; they'd already said their goodbyes. But she could feel the eyes of her friends on her, all standing on the terrace. Allison had forbidden them to accompany her to the stone.

Suddenly something occurred to her and she turned around and ran back. Astonished, the four stared at her.

"What is it?" asked Caitrin with a smile, "Do you need to go to the bathroom again?"

Allison grimaced. "No, I wanted to know if you found out anything new about Finlay."

She had forgotten to ask and knew it would give her no peace of mind. After all, she had let Caitrin down with the research.

Caitrin bit her lip and nodded. "Yes, I did find out something, and it's your fault."

"What is it?"

"His name was actually on one of the lists. He's in the USA, and he's on the East Coast."

"Where exactly?"

"In New York."

"And what else did you find out?" she asked breathlessly.

"Nothing."

Allison looked at her seriously. "Look through the death records from New York. They probably kept good records."

Caitrin's eyes widened. "I can't."

Allison opened her mouth to object, but then closed it again. "I understand," was all she said, "Good luck, Caitrin. I'm sure you'll find him."

Her friend hugged her, "Thank you for finding him for me."

Allison smiled. "Thank you for showing me the gateway to my time."

And then she turned away and ran to the stone.

This time, Allison awoke not in the castle but in a garden she had never seen before. Caitrin had mentioned that you could never predict exactly where you were going to arrive but that there were clear signs that the location you landed in was directly linked to where you were thinking about right before traveling. The first time, Allison had indeed thought about the castle, and this time she had apparently ended up somewhere else. But where? It irritated her that she couldn't navigate more precisely.

The intense smell of herbs surrounded her. With difficulty, she straightened up and looked around. Once again, her head was pounding, and she found it difficult to focus her gaze. Then she noticed there was a house next to this garden. It was made of gray stone and looked vaguely familiar. And then she realized it was Cailean's grandmother's house.

She was still clutching the bag now that Caitrin had explained the need to focus on the bag when she traveled. Only then would it travel with her to the other time. But even so, it might not work because often travelers would let go of it when they fell. Luckily, the bag was still there, and so were the medicines.

Suddenly she heard footsteps. Hurried footsteps on gravel, coming in her direction. Damn! Allison scrambled to her feet, trying to figure out where to hide when a figure came around the corner of the house. It was a young woman, and she was staring at Allison with wide eyes. It took a second for Allison to recognize her since she had only seen her once before. But that particular moment was burned into her memory. It had been in the hallway next to the Great Hall, and this girl's father had been lying dead on the floor. It was Ila Maclean, Hamish's sister.

The girl smiled and cautiously stepped closer. "Have you just arrived?" she asked kindly.

Allison stared at her, wondering what she meant by that.

Ila made a reassuring gesture and took another step closer, as if she were approaching a frightened animal. "I saw you from inside.

You were there all of a sudden. You just appeared. I've never seen anything like it."

Allison nodded slowly, wondering what Ila knew about the stone. She was still holding her amulet in her hand. Not knowing what she could and could not say to Ila, she tried another tactic. Distract.

"What are you doing here?" She looked around and tried to see the sun. Again, it had just risen. "It's so early in the morning. Don't you have to be at the castle?"

Ila regarded her thoughtfully, then said, "I was searching for medicinal herbs because I was hoping Rhona or her grandmother had left some here."

Allison straightened her shoulders and held her bag tighter. "What do you need those for?"

Again, Ila looked at her for a long time, as if weighing whether she could trust Allison. "It's for Cailean. He's hurt."

Allison pressed her lips together and took a deep breath.

Ila tilted her head slightly. "So, you know about that."

Allison nodded.

"Can you help me find the right medicinal herbs?"

Allison knew she had to decide whether she trusted Ila. But basically, she did know that she could, because in a few years, Ila would be the gatekeeper.

"I came back to help Cailean. I brought enough..." she searched for the right word, "medicine."

Ila exhaled in relief. "That's good, because I don't know much about that."

"Is he..." Allison took a deep breath, "badly hurt?"

Ila hesitated, then raised her shoulders. "I haven't been able to spend much time with him because Hamish locked him up. But the wound isn't deep. It just keeps bleeding whenever he moves. I've tried to keep it clean, but it's been difficult because he's tied up."

Allison's heart raced almost to bursting. "Take me to him," she groaned.

To her surprise, Ila nodded. "I think that's for the best. Come."

Allison followed her out of the garden, clutching the bag tightly. Her mind raced. What had Evan said she should do first? Clean the wound. And then what?

She realized how lucky she was that Ila had found her. And as she hurried after the girl, she also realized how grateful she was to her for trying to take care of Cailean.

"Ila?" she asked.

The girl looked back over her shoulder as they walked across the courtyard. In the distance, Allison could already see the castle. "Yes?"

"Why are you doing this for him?"

Ila frowned. "Because he's my big brother. He's always taken good care of me. So has Rhona. And if she were here, she'd be caring for him. But because she's not here, I have to do it now."

Allison tried to keep up with her nimble steps. She ran as surely as an animal among the trees. "But Hamish is your brother, too. Your real one. What if he catches you?"

Ila frowned. "He won't. Besides, he didn't mean to hurt him."

Allison stopped. "He didn't mean to? But he injured Cailean and apparently has him shackled."

Ila also stopped and nodded seriously. "I'm very angry with him for that, too. But I know he doesn't want to hurt Cailean. He just doesn't know any other way to act. He'll be grateful someday that I took care of Cailean. He loves him, too, after all."

She started moving again.

Allison followed her. If this was love, Hamish had a strange way of showing it. And if Ila was right, she was wiser than she should be at her age.

"Why did he want to capture Cailean in the first place?" she asked.

Ila looked over her shoulder. "Because of you. And because of Rhona."

Allison pressed her lips together, her guilty conscience weighing heavily on her.

"Don't worry," Ila continued. "It was Cailean's sole decision to free you. It was not your fault. Cailean knows Hamish and knew that would make him very angry." She smiled. "He must like you very much."

Allison lowered her head, not knowing how to answer.

Ila laughed. "Cailean probably likes you just as much as Hamish is afraid of you."

Surprised, she looked at Ila. "Hamish isn't afraid of me."

But the moment she said it, she knew it was true. Allison knew his secret. But Ila knew nothing about that. Or did she? She seemed to be a very observant girl.

Ila shrugged. "Basically, Hamish is afraid of all women. Especially those who can think for themselves. So, that means Rhona, her grandmother, my mother, and of course, you."

"And you too," Allison added.

Ila blushed and shook her head. "Hamish isn't afraid of me. He doesn't even realize I'm there most of the time."

Allison looked at her from the side. "That can be an advantage, too. And I think you know how to use it well."

The red spots on Ila's cheeks got a little redder. "I just want there to be peace, and sometimes that's difficult because Hamish is such a stubborn man. If only he would listen to women, so many things

would be easier."

She took a deep breath. "You sound like Rhona."

Ila raised her shoulders. "That may be because she is my sister."

Allison noted that she liked Ila Maclean. She would make an excellent gatekeeper. And that reminded her. She stopped and opened her bag. Although she wanted nothing more than to get to Cailean as quickly as possible, she didn't know if she'd have time for this later.

Curious, Ila came over as Allison was pulling something out of her bag. Caitrin had placed it into a piece of cloth. She handed it to Ila. "This is for you."

"What is this?" the girl asked, accepting it. Then she opened it and stared blankly at her hand. "This is Rhona's amulet," she said.

Allison shook her head. "No, this one," she opened her other hand, "is Rhona's amulet. That one is yours."

"Mine?"

Allison nodded. "A friend gave it to me and said it was for you."

"But why...", Ila continued, then she touched the amulet and her eyes grew big. Quickly she withdrew her fingers. "What is it?"

"You can feel it?" asked Allison.

Ila nodded. "It tingles."

Allison smiled. "Rhona will explain everything to you. But right now, put it on and make sure no one takes it away from you. I made the ribbon extra long so no one will see the amulet when it's under your clothes."

Ila quickly tied it around her neck and put her hand protectively over it. "Will Rhona come back?"

Allison nodded. "I'm sure she will."

"Good," Ila said with a shake of her head, "because I think she's the only one who can talk some sense into Hamish." Then she took a deep breath. "Come, we must go to Cailean."

Allison's stomach tightened. She was grateful that Cailean didn't seem to be too badly hurt and was at least still alive, but that meant nothing in these times. She was also glad she had met Ila, because that would make a lot of things, like find him, easier.

The forest around them was just waking up, and the birds were singing at the top of their lungs. Every now and then, a hare ran across the path. It would have been an idyllic summer morning if only she hadn't been racked with fear.

Allison occasionally spied the castle between the trees as they began the climb up the hill. Soon they had reached the castle.

"We'll use the back door," Ila said.

She led Allison to a small door and opened it. She realized this must be the same door she and Cailean used during her escape, and also the same door Jenna had later used, or would use, to save Evan. How confusing this all was.

To her surprise, Ila did not lead her downstairs toward the dungeon, but climbed the stairs.

"Shouldn't we go downstairs?" asked Allison quietly.

Ila shook her head. "He's in his room."

Allison's heart beat faster. That was good since it would be cleaner up there and have light. Still, she asked, "Why?"

Ila smiled. "I told you, Hamish doesn't really mean it. He could never keep Cailean locked up down there."

With me, on the other hand, he didn't mind, Allison thought bitterly. But she tried to see it as a good sign. Maybe Cailean wasn't in as much danger as she had thought.

They came to the hallway which led to the Great Hall and also to the stairwell leading to Cailean's room. Allison was shaking by now. What if someone caught her?

Despite the early morning hour, the large hall was already bustling with activity. The maids were setting the table for breakfast. But there was still no sign of any of the other inhabitants of the castle.

Ila took Allison's arm and pulled her forward. Together they scurried up the stairs. Just before they reached the hallway near Cailean's room, Ila stopped. She leaned forward and whispered in Allison's ear, "Stay here until the coast is clear. I'll come get you. Go into the alcove right there."

She pushed Allison behind a curtain into a bay window that apparently served as a utility closet. It was filled with brooms and a bucket with some rags hanging over the edge. She squeezed between them, trying to steady her breathing. Inhale on four, hold on four...

Then she heard Ila's voice. "Good morning, Dougal, breakfast is being served."

"Good morning, Ila," a deep voice replied. "So, you think I should get something to eat?"

"Yes, and you can even eat it in the hall. I'll keep watch here until then."

There was silence for a brief moment, then Dougal said, "Don't get caught, girl."

"Thank you," Ila replied, and Allison could hear the smile in her voice.

Ila would have made a good reporter, she thought. They also needed tricks like that to get in somewhere or to gather information.

A moment later, she heard heavy footsteps on the stairs beside her, then hurried feet.

"Come quickly, we only have a short time," Ila said.

Allison didn't need to be told twice. She ran down the hall to Cailean's room. Ila followed on her heels.

Allison rushed into the room and pressed her hand over her mouth to stifle a scream when she saw Cailean lying on the bed. His shirt was still soaked with blood, though it appeared to have dried. He was pale and his eyes were closed. His hands were tied to the head of the bed, but at least he was still breathing.

She sank down on the bed next to him and the movement startled him. He contorted his face painfully. Then he opened his eyes.

"Cailean," Allison whispered. "It's me."

His eyes widened. "Allison. You shouldn't be here."

His voice was more like a croak.

"Well, I am. And I'm going to help you."

He shook his head. "Go to the stone. Go home. It's..., " he groaned, "too dangerous."

Allison stroked his forehead. He wasn't feverish. "I have been home, and I've gotten everything I need to help you. But first, we have to get you out of here."

She tried to untie his bonds, but Cailean and Ila said in unison, "No."

Allison paused. "Why not? Then I can take care of you carefully, and we'll get you to safety."

Cailean shook his head and gathered his strength. "No. I have to stay here."

"Why?" Allison stared at him, stunned.

He wanted to say something else but just swallowed, apparently, speaking was straining him too much. She really had to get him out of here.

Ila came over to the bed. "Because Hamish would never forgive him for that. If he stays, everything will be fine. Hamish will eventually come to his senses."

Cailean nodded.

"But you'll have bled to death by then," Allison said, upset. "He can't just leave you lying here like this."

Cailean swallowed again. "I'll be fine."

Allison looked at him, perplexed. What should she do?

"Can't you take care of him here?" asked Ila. She had switched to the personal form of address, perhaps because they were now allies with the common goal of helping Cailean. For some reason, that made her feel a bit calmer. It was always good to have allies. "You said you brought healing herbs," Ila continued.

Allison wiped her brow. "And then? I can't just leave again and hope Hamish will eventually realize what a jerk he is."

Cailean managed a small smile. "Yes, you can. He'll understand."

Allison gave an annoyed sigh. "And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

His face became serious. "Go home."

"No," Allison said. "I'm not leaving you alone again. Ever."

Cailean looked into her eyes for a long time with such warmth that she almost melted. She wanted this man so much and she knew with every fiber of her heart that it was right to stay.

"How about she gets Rhona?" said Ila quietly.

Allison turned to her with excitement, but Cailean said, "No."

She raised her eyebrows. Why was she still arguing with him while he was lying here weak and injured?

"Surely Rhona could help. I think it's a good idea."

Cailean shook his head. "Too dangerous for you."

His face contorted in pain, and Allison noticed beads of sweat on his forehead. She placed her hand on it, but it was cool. She wondered if he was sweating because of the pain.

"But it would be good if we had Rhona here. She's the only one who can bring Hamish to his senses. You know that yourself," Ila said.

Cailean laid his head on the pillow. "I want you to return home, Allison."

She leaned over and looked at him. "I am home."

Silently he returned her gaze, but she could feel that her words made him happy.

"We have to hurry," Ila urged. "Dougal will be back soon."

Allison took a deep breath. "So it's settled. I'll go and tell Rhona,

and then we'll hope Hamish comes to his senses. And until then, I'll take care of you and your wounds."

Cailean gritted his teeth and shook his head, but Allison ignored it. She dumped the contents of her bag on the bed and tried to figure out what to start with.

A note had sailed out. Astonished, Allison picked it up. She hadn't even noticed that Evan had packed it. It was handwritten on fine handmade paper in Jenna's handwriting. Allison saw that immediately. Her eyes skimmed the note and then she realized what it was. Evan had dictated instructions to Jenna on how to administer the medication. He had probably guessed that Allison would be overwhelmed when she was with Cailean.

She absorbed all the information as quickly as she could. Then she looked at Cailean. "Where is the wound?"

"On the shoulder," Ila answered for him.

"Then it wasn't very smart to bind his hands," Allison muttered. Even she could see that.

"That's why I couldn't clean the wound."

"I'm going to cut you loose now," Allison declared.

Cailean shook his head, but she ignored that too.

"I can't help you otherwise. But I'll tie you up again afterwards."

He seemed to admit defeat and closed his eyes while she carefully loosened the bonds. He groaned and sucked in air sharply as she guided his hands downward. Immediately, bright red blood seeped through his shirt.

Allison steeled herself inwardly for what she was about to see and hoped she wouldn't feel sick. She had never been good at seeing blood. Another reason why she was glad she had never worked as a war correspondent.

She loosened the ties on his shirt and carefully pushed it aside. The cut was a deep and parallel to the collarbone. It had been closed by the hands tied above his head, but now the blood was oozing out and the edges of the wound were gaping apart. The skin around it was covered with dried blood.

Allison was about to pull the edges of the wound apart to see how deep the cut was, just as Evan had explained, when she remembered something. She picked up the glass bottle of disinfectant and rubbed it on her hands. A sharp smell filled the air.

"What is that?" asked Ila curiously.

"It makes my hands clean," Allison explained. She didn't want to start discussing bacteria right now.

"It smells like whiskey."

"It's something like that." At least she hoped so. "But you can't drink it," she added quickly, since she had no idea what happened

when you drank disinfectant.

Allison took a deep breath and then examined the wound. Cailean clenched his teeth so hard that the muscles on his jaw trembled, but he did not move.

"I'm sorry," she said, "But this is about to hurt even more. Can you handle it?"

Cailean gave a slight nod and closed his eyes.

She took one of the sterile cloths, soaked it in disinfectant, and cleaned the wound. Cailean let out a stifled cry and twitched briefly, but then lay very still. His breathing was rapid and intermittent whenever Allison touched the wound.

Evan and Caitrin had discussed whether Allison should suture the wound, and they had packed a needle and thread to be on the safe side. Evan had advocated applying as tight a bandage as possible to compress the wound, while Caitrin had felt that Allison could best do that with stitches. But Allison realized that she really wouldn't be able to if Cailean was already feeling such pain just from disinfecting the wound.

Allison picked up an elastic bandage and she saw Ila staring at it, fascinated. Caitrin had made an effort to replace all plastic packaging with glass bottles or canvas bags. It meant that some things were no longer sterile, but at least it was better than having plastic garbage lying around that would be hard to explain. The elastic bandage was unusual enough.

Allison was thinking about how best to dress the wound when she heard someone clearing his throat outside. She winced.

"Dougal is back," Ila whispered.

"Distract him. I'm not done yet."

Ila went to the door, opened it a crack, and said something quietly to Dougal. He snorted in amusement and Ila closed the door again. "Hurry up," she whispered.

Allison nodded and began to wrap the elastic bandage around Cailean's shoulder. To do that, she had to take his arm out of his shirt. Cailean gasped as she moved his arm, but then pressed his lips together and remained still. Pale, he sank back onto the pillow.

Allison continued her work, wrapping his entire shoulder so that the wound was held together well. By the time she finished, she was drenched in sweat, having had to lift Cailean's upper body over and over to get the bandage through underneath. Cailean looked exhausted too, but he was smiling.

"What is it?" she asked, breathing heavily.

"It was nice to smell you. Like the first night."

Allison frowned. That's what he was thinking about now? Then she remembered that she had used her orange shampoo in the shower a

few hours ago. The scent still lingered in her hair, she smelled it herself. She thought of the first night Cailean had untied her dress. He had probably smelled it then, too.

She leaned over him and kissed him gently on the cheek, her hair falling over his face. Deeply, he inhaled. "I'm dreaming," he said.

Allison shook her head. "I hope not."

Ila stood beside the bed, wringing her hands. "I can't stall Dougal much longer."

Allison sat up and studied Jenna's note again. Everything was listed there. If and how the antibiotic had to be given, if a tetanus shot was necessary, and how and with what material the bandages should be changed. Allison handed the note to Ila and said, "This gives instructions for everything you need to do if he gets a fever or gangrene. The dressing needs to be changed every day. And he must not move. Not at all, do you hear?"

Ila's eyes widened. "You want me to do this?"

"If you can think of anyone else, you're welcome to get help, but I'm afraid it's probably just up to you. So yes." She held up a glass vial. "This is something for pain. Give him two of these every six hours. It should last until I get back."

Allison was so grateful that Evan had planned a few days ahead. But if she had to, she could go back for more supplies. Even if it was a long trip.

She reached for the cup that stood on a small table. There was still liquid in it. Ale, probably. Then she held out a tablet to Cailean. "Swallow this. Don't chew."

He frowned but did as she said.

"It will ease the pain," Allison explained. "But you still shouldn't move."

They heard a noise outside. Ila bit her lip. "You need to tie him back up."

Perplexed, Allison looked at Cailean. She had bound his shoulder so tightly that he could not lift his right arm. She would never be able to tie him up with his hands above his head.

Instead, she took his hands, placed them on his belly, tied the rope around it and wrapped the other end around his feet. He looked like a trussed package and her heart was bleeding, but there was no other way. He couldn't move and he couldn't escape either.

"But you have to tie him back the way you did before," Ila protested.

Allison shook her head. "There's no other way. Otherwise, the wound will keep opening up." She took the girl's hands. "Listen, this is something you have to do for him. Convince Hamish, Dougal, or whoever, that it's better for him to be bound like this. They'll agree

because you have the power to convince them. It's important to keep him lying like that. Can you do that?"

Ila hesitated, then nodded unhappily.

"Good, and there's one more thing. Arrange food for him that will make sure he replenishes his blood. He's lost a lot."

Ila's eyes widened. "And what would that be?"

"Meat and oats and hazelnuts. But mostly red meat. Can you manage that?"

Again the girl nodded.

"And make sure he drinks plenty. You have to take care of that, too."

Ila wrung her hands. "What if Hamish catches me here? He'll get mad."

Allison reached for her hands once more. "He won't, because you know the trick so that Hamish doesn't even know you're here. Keep it that way."

Allison pressed the canvas bag into Ila's hand and picked up her bag. She had to leave. The most important thing now was to get to Rhona. She would know what to do.

She bent over Cailean once more, but he had either fallen asleep or passed out. She wanted to shake him awake so that she could say goodbye, but surely this was for the best. She prayed he would feel better when she returned. So, she simply kissed him on the forehead. She would do everything she could to make him well again.

"Now take me to the linen room off the hallway by the Great Hall," she said to Ila.

She blinked in confusion. "Why?"

"Because I need to get ready for the trip. And I need a horse."

Allison stopped her horse and buried her face in the animal's mane, and began to sob. Rain fell down her neck, but she didn't care because she was completely soaked anyway. And hungry, so hungry. She had eaten almost nothing for six days.

Everything had been going so well when she left, and now everything was just terrible. And the worst was that she had no idea where she was. She was hopelessly lost in the 16th century Scottish Highlands, and there wasn't even a single soul around to ask for directions.

Her legs were so cold she could hardly feel them. For the first few hours, she had congratulated herself on her spontaneous decision to dress up as a man. She had used an undergarment as a shirt and belted Cailean's plaid so that it looked like a kilt and served as her cloak. Just as the men did in this century.

Her hair was tied up and hidden under a cap. The only thing reminding her she was a woman was her bra, which she had dragged out of the linen closet from under a pile of rags. She had decided to wear it so that riding without a bodice would not be as uncomfortable. And no one had seen the bra until it unexpectedly began raining and had soaked the linen undergarment because she hadn't been able to wrap the plaid around herself fast enough. Fortunately, no one had been around.

In any case, Allison had only seen a couple of people in the distance and had avoided them because she knew that her disguise would be blown as soon as she approached anyone. She only appeared to be a man from the distance.

She was able to sit in the saddle like a Highlander and thus made faster progress, which didn't help if you didn't know the way. Allison had imagined that she would find it easily. Basically, all she had to do was ride in a northeasterly direction. And she had been sure that she would recognize a few places. However, she had apparently not been paying attention on her first ride to Freuchie Castle, because she had not passed anything she recognized for a long time. On the contrary,

the landscape was completely foreign to her.

This might also be due to the fact that it had been raining continuously since her departure six days ago. Every landscape looked completely different in the rain than in the sunshine. It was so wet that she couldn't even light a fire. She had tried several times, but the matches had gotten wet and the wood was much too damp anyway. Besides, the fire would only have served to keep her warm. Since she hadn't planned this trip, she had forgotten to pack anything to eat in her excitement. A few times she had found blackberries and tiny wild strawberries, but those had made her hungrier rather than full. And by now she was so exhausted she thought she was hallucinating.

None of this helped her find the correct path. Days passed and Allison realized that if she had thought this through better, she could have been there and back with Rhona by now. She realized that she needed to find someone in order to get something edible, and also to get back on track. But still she shied away from looking for anyone.

With difficulty, she straightened up and gazed around. Everything around her looked the same and with the path forking in front of her, she didn't know which direction to take. She didn't even have a clue which way was northeast. She hadn't seen the sun for days.

Suddenly a rider appeared at the top of the ridge. He must have seen her, too, because he reined in his horse and looked down at her. Oh, God, Allison thought. She would never escape him if he meant her harm. She was much too weak to fight.

But maybe it was also a good opportunity, because she could ask him for directions. Maybe she just had to dare. But she couldn't move and just stared at him.

After a while, he spurred his horse and slowly came down the slope. Allison grabbed the reins and watched him warily. She had no weapon with her except a small knife, but this man carried as huge a sword similar to the type Cailean and the other men here often did. She would never be able to defend herself against him.

When he reached the bottom of the hill, he spurred his horse and took only a few heartbeats reach her. "Allison?" he called out.

She blinked and wondered if she had misheard. Was she hallucinating after all?

She strained to see through the rain. But now he was becoming clearer and clearer. When she recognized him, she almost fell off her horse with relief. She was sobbing when he reached her.

"Allison? Is everything all right?" asked Ian.

She shook her head and wiped her sleeve over her eyes, not caring as her tears mixed with the rain. "What are you doing here?" she asked with a sob.

He brought his horse to a stop right next to hers. "I've been looking

for you. Or rather, for Cailean. Malcolm sent me out. The ten days were up, and he hadn't yet reappeared as promised."

Allison took a deep breath, but it was more of a sob again. She was so relieved. Cailean had helped her again. She was so grateful to him.

"I got lost," she confessed, "I've been on the road for six days."

Ian's eyebrows shot up. "Really? You're not that far from Freuchie. I only left an hour ago. Malcolm took the other way, through Glen Duisk."

Allison didn't like to admit that she would never have found her way to Freuchie. But Ian surely already knew that.

"Can you take me to Rhona? I need her help."

Ian nodded. "Come."

Trembling, Allison lifted the reins and spurred her horse, but it didn't move. It had done this a few times before. It was probably just as exhausted as Allison. But at least it could eat grass.

"Damn," she muttered.

Ian looked at them, then sighed. "Ride with me on my horse, and I'll tie yours to my saddle. We'll go faster that way."

Allison hesitated, but Ian said, "I think it would be good if you got warm and had something to eat. You'll fall off your horse on the way otherwise. And that won't help anyone."

He steered his steed next to Allison and unceremoniously lifted her over to his horse. Then they set off on their way.

Allison was in a daze, but the relief of not having to decide anything was so great that she felt almost delirious.

It was a strange feeling to ride in a saddle in front of someone other than Cailean, but she trusted Ian. Strange, when she remembered how afraid she had been of him when he had waylaid them at Cailen's grandmother's house.

They rode in silence, and eventually, Freuchie Castle appeared out of the mist. Allison began to cry again, she just couldn't suppress it. Ian pretended not to notice, and she was grateful to him for that.

A little later they rode into the castle courtyard, and Ian lifted her out of the saddle. He rummaged in his saddlebag, pulled out an extra plaid, and handed it to her. "Wrap this around you like a skirt."

He looked discreetly to the side and Allison became aware of her bare legs. They weren't a big deal if everyone thought she was a man, but anyone who knew she was a woman would take offense.

Ian took her upstairs and Allison could barely keep up with him. For one thing, she was exhausted, and for another, she had to hold onto Ian's plaid as it kept getting tangled between her legs. But she enjoyed the warmth of the castle.

Rhona was already coming to meet them in the hall. "Allison," she called out, "what are you doing here? Where's Cailean?"

Allison swayed a little and Rhona held her by the arm. "What happened?"

"You have to help Cailean," she said, "Hamish, he's..." Then her knees sagged out from under her. Ian caught her just in time.

"She needs to lie down and she needs something to eat," Allison heard Rhona say as if through a fog.

Someone, probably Ian, carried her up a flight of stairs, then laid her on a bed. Someone helped her out of her clothes and Allison heard an incredulous gasp. Presumably, they had just noticed the men's clothes or her bra. But she didn't care.

Rhona gave instructions, and Allison was wrapped in a warm and, and most importantly, dry blanket. Then someone poured a warm, spicy drink and Allison felt as if her spirits had abruptly returned. She opened her eyes and searched for Rhona. She was standing right next to her with a worried expression.

"We figured something had gone wrong," she said. "Cailean told Malcolm he'd return here after ten days. If not, Malcolm should come looking for him. He left two hours ago."

Allison nodded and tried to sit up, but Rhona pushed her back down on the bed. "Tell me what happened. What did Hamish do? And why are you here?"

She didn't ask, "Why didn't you leave?" and Allison was grateful for that because she couldn't explain everything right now.

"When we arrived at the stone," she said, trying to think clearly, which was still a little difficult for her. But she was already feeling so much better here in the warm chamber rather than out in the rain. "Hamish was waiting for Cailean. They fought, but they were four against only Cailean. He was injured. Here in the shoulder. And then Hamish captured him."

Breathless, she paused.

A determined expression appeared on Rhona's face. "That son of a bitch. How bad is it?"

Allison wiped her face. "Not as bad as I thought."

"Did anyone take care of him?"

Allison nodded. "Yes. I did."

Rhona squeezed her hand. "Thank you. And then?"

"Ila helped me. It was her idea for me to come get you."

Rhona raised her eyebrows. "You rode here all by yourself?"

Allison nodded.

"And Cailean allowed this to happen? Then he must be in a very bad way." She rose.

Allison shook her head. "He didn't want me to but I did it anyway."

The expression on Rhona's face changed. Suddenly, she looked at Allison with a mixture of respect and curiosity. "Thank you, Allison. It

was the right thing to do. But you could have died doing it."

Allison swallowed. "I probably would have if Ian hadn't found me."

"I need to go to Dundarg. Now." Rhona turned toward the door.

Allison rose with difficulty. "I'll go with you."

"You won't. You're too weak."

But Allison shook her head. "You can tie me to a horse if necessary, but I'm coming with you."

Actually though, she wasn't quite sure whether she would survive the ride. But she didn't care. She had to go to Cailean.

Allison had expected Rhona to disagree, but eventually, she shrugged. "Ian rode off to bring Malcolm home. By the time they return, I'm sure it will be almost evening. We won't be able to ride at night in this rain. So, you have until morning to recover."

"Thank you," Allison said.

Rhona hesitated. "Thank you, Allison. If Cailean is in this situation because of the two of us, it's our job to get him out of it. We'll talk more later."

Allison nodded and lay down again. She would be up and about by morning, she promised herself.

"Allison?" asked Rhona from the doorway.

"Yes?"

"Can I lend you a dress for the ride? I think it would make life easier for all of us."

Allison had to smile and nodded. "But I sit like a man on a horse," she said.

Rhona raised her eyebrows. "Of course. Anything else is uncomfortable, isn't it? We're not English girls, after all."

Then she left, and Allison focused on gathering her strength.

The return was quite different from Allison's ride to Freuchie

Castle. They had enough provisions with them, the horses were rested, and the men and even Rhona, seemed to know the way very well. They rode briskly, but Allison noticed that everyone was paying attention to how she was doing. Not wanting to be the one holding the group back, she gritted her teeth even when she felt she couldn't go on. She had already lost enough time.

Rhona was obviously worried about Cailean. Malcolm didn't let on, but he, too, was more serious than usual.

On the second evening, the night before they would reach Dundarg, Allison decided to talk to Rhona. They hadn't spoken much about what would happen when they arrived, but Allison suspected Rhona had a plan. Still, she wanted her to know everything about Hamish. Who knew if it could help her talk some sense into him.

The rain had stopped a few hours ago, Ian had built a fire, and Malcolm had returned from the forest with a rabbit, which was now roasting over the fire.

Rhona sat a little apart from them, lost in thought. Cautiously, Allison approached her. "Can we talk?" she asked.

Rhona eyed her for a moment, then nodded. "Maybe it's for the best. After all, I don't even know why Hamish is so angry with you."

Allison lowered her head. It was time to tell the story. She took a deep breath and glanced over at the men. They were far enough away that they couldn't hear anything.

"I know something about Hamish that he doesn't want anyone else to know. That's why he locked me in the dungeon."

Rhona frowned. "I thought he imprisoned you because you had something to do with his father's death. Or because he thought so. At least that's what Cailean told me."

Allison hesitated, then shook her head. "That was just an excuse. I found him when the Laird was choking, and I tried to help, but he died anyway. It was the perfect opportunity for Hamish to imprison me in the dungeon."

Astonished, Rhona raised her eyebrows. "He locked you in the dungeon? I find that hard to believe."

Allison frowned. Why did everyone assume Hamish wasn't that bad? Almost defiantly, she said, "Well, he did. I was locked down there for two weeks and probably still would be if Cailean hadn't freed me."

Rhona gave a snort as if wondering whether Allison was telling the truth. Then her eyes narrowed. Like a bird of prey, she looked at Allison. "You said you knew something about him. What is it? It must be bad if he put you in the dungeon for it. He doesn't usually do things like that."

Allison wrung her hands and considered whether she really should tell her, but since it could help Cailean, she had no choice. "When I first arrived here, I caught him doing something."

Rhona sat up. "Doing what?"

"He was kissing a man."

Allison whispered the words, fearing that Malcolm or Ian would overhear them.

Rhona stared at her silently, then nodded slowly. Allison watched her and wondered if she had understood the information. Did a woman like Rhona, who had grown up here in the Highlands in the 16th century, know that there was such a thing as love between men or women? But just like Cailean, Rhona surprised her.

"He should be more careful. As a Laird, this could end badly for him." She sighed. "But he probably knows that. That's why he punished you so harshly. No wonder he's acting like this. He's probably afraid you've told Cailean."

Allison stared at her open-mouthed. "You know about this?"

Rhona shrugged. "I think I was the only woman he ever kissed."

Now it was she who spoke softly, looking around to see if the men were nearby.

"You and Hamish were a couple?"

Rhona raised her eyebrows. "Is that what you call it?" Then she shrugged. "We grew up together, and when I was a little older than Ila is now, we kissed and then some."

She actually blushed. Allison listened to her, spellbound.

"And I think I noticed it then. Somehow, he didn't really want to. I always felt like he did it because he had to." She turned again. "There was another boy though, and it was different with him. Very different."

"But how did you know Hamish liked men better than women?"

Rhona smiled. "My grandmother enlightened me that there was such a thing and that Hamish was one of those men."

"Do you think it's bad?" Allison asked.

Rhona shook her head. "I feel sorry for him, because he has no way out. As Laird, he must marry a wife and produce offspring. And he can never give in to his desire. At least not openly. I would wish otherwise for him, since he is a good man. Though, you probably see it differently, Allison."

Allison could hardly believe what she was hearing. So accepting, she thought. Some people from her time could take a leaf out of their book.

"Does he know you know?" she asked, intrigued.

Rhona raised her shoulders. "I think he suspects, and knows I love him anyway. But just like a brother."

"So that's the reason he wants to marry you," Allison noted. "You accept him for who he is, and then he would have a wife."

Rhona looked at her almost amused. "You catch on quickly." Then she sighed. "I had always thought I could, and I wanted to do that for him. On my terms, though. But then Malcolm came along, and from that moment on, I knew I'd never be able to marry Hamish. Not after I learned what it really felt like to love a man," she narrowed her eyes almost coquettishly, "and to be loved."

Allison nodded and stared over at the fire. "I know what you mean."

Rhona looked at her and it seemed like she wanted to say something, but she remained silent.

"Do you think everything will be okay?" Allison asked, thinking about how she had left Cailean. She really hoped that Ila was following her instructions. If Cailean had been in a 21st century infirmary, she wouldn't have worried. But like this? Anything could go wrong, and there was a real concern that his life was in danger.

Her chest tightened again.

Rhona smiled. "Don't worry. Hamish won't hurt Cailean."

Allison wrapped her arms around her torso. Suddenly she felt cold. "But he injured him with a sword."

Rhona shrugged. "I don't think he meant to kill him. He loves Cailean far too much and needs him if he's going to be successful as Laird. He wouldn't hurt him."

A shiver ran down Allison's spine. "What do you mean he loves Cailean?"

Her heart suddenly beat faster.

Rhona stared at her. Then she shook her head, causing an auburn strand to come loose from her hairdo. "Not like that. He loves him like a brother. You have to believe that."

Allison took a deep breath. Rhona put a hand on her arm and looked at her. "And even if he did, it wouldn't matter because Cailean isn't interested in men. I know for a fact that he loves women, or

rather that he loves a woman."

Allison lowered her head because she could no longer stand Rhona's gaze.

"And to be honest, I never thought that would happen. My brother is actually far too freedom-loving for that. But for some reason you managed to win his heart. And I know firsthand by now what that means with these men. They would do anything to be with us and protect us."

She was about to say something else, but Malcolm joined them to let them know that dinner was ready. He eyed Rhona questioningly, but she avoided his gaze. She squeezed Allison's arm again and rose, then strolled hand in hand with Malcolm over to the fire.

Allison stared after them, wondering what had happened to make Rhona suddenly accept her. She felt like she had gained a sister.

Rhona marched straight toward the main gate, but Allison was hesitant. "Shouldn't we use the back entrance?"

Rhona shook her head. "No. I don't want Hamish to think I'm afraid of him." She took Allison's hand. "Come on. We can do this."

Allison thought of Cailean, and how he had always said just that, and let Rhona pull her along. She really had no choice anyway.

The guards at the gate looked at her and exchanged a nervous glance, but Rhona greeted them kindly, by name, and simply walked past them.

Allison's stomach was churning, and she forced herself to breathe calmly. Inhale on four, hold on four... She wished Malcolm and Ian could have come with them, but they had stayed at Rhona's grandmother's house. Rhona had been very clear that it would do more harm than good if they came along to the castle. Nevertheless, Allison wished they were both here. At least they had swords and could have defended them. But the guards didn't budge and just looked at them curiously. Allison took a breath, at least they were inside the castle now.

When they reached the castle courtyard, Rhona stopped so abruptly that Allison ran into her. She peered past Rhona and noticed Hamish standing in the middle of the courtyard. His hands were clasped at his sides, and he was facing them. He looked fearsome with his scowl and sword at his side.

A shiver ran down Allison's spine. She hadn't expected to meet him so quickly. Actually, she was usually not the type to be afraid of men, but she was afraid of Hamish. And that annoyed her beyond measure. She was actually a strong woman. But then again, no one had ever locked her in a dungeon.

Rhona snorted and straightened her shoulders, then pulled Allison along by the hand and headed straight for Hamish.

"So you came back too," he said, fixing Rhona with an impenetrable stare.

She stepped up close to him and said, "We should talk somewhere

else, Hamish."

"No, I think it's pretty good here," he said.

"Oh yeah, do you really want me to tell you what I have to say in front of all your men?"

Hamish's gaze flickered to Allison and she saw a trace of uncertainty in it. He was probably wondering if Allison had told Rhona something. Sweat broke out and she was annoyed. Again, she tried to breathe.

Hamish straightened up a little more, then said, as loudly as he could, "I want to talk to you in my study. Alone."

Rhona shook her head and gripped Allison's hand tighter. "She's coming with me."

Hamish clenched his teeth so hard the muscles rippled against his powerful jaw. "No."

"Yes, she will. She has just much to do with this whole thing as I do."

"She's a runaway Grant who killed my father. I should throw her right back in the dungeon."

He gave Allison a look that made her shiver. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Angus and two other men getting ready. They were probably just waiting for the order.

Rhona lifted her chin and said so softly that only Hamish and Allison could hear, "You know very well that's not true, and I can tell you this, if you throw my sister-in-law in the dungeon again, we'll have trouble. And you don't want that."

Allison winced when Rhona said the word sister-in-law, but she squeezed her hand reassuringly.

Hamish stared at Rhona. "Your sister-in-law? Is she the sister of...", he almost spat out the word, "him?" He couldn't manage to choke out Malcolm's name.

Rhona shook her head. "No, she's Cailean's wife."

Hamish opened his mouth and closed it again, then stared at Allison. "But, how..."

Rhona took a deep breath and put on a sweet smile. "Now, do you understand why she has a say? I hardly think we want to discuss all this in the courtyard."

Hamish gave her a murderous look, and Allison wondered if Rhona's tactics were really that clever. But she didn't have a better suggestion.

Finally, without a word, Hamish turned and walked across the courtyard. Rhona pulled Allison, and some of the men followed, presumably the guards.

Allison stepped inside the castle with trepidation and suddenly felt trapped. But she also knew she was getting closer and closer to

Cailean. As they walked through the corridors, she fought the urge to break free and run to his room. She didn't even know if he was still alive, yet she was so close to him.

She took a shaky breath, and Rhona squeezed her hand again. Allison was grateful that Rhona had not let go of her hand for even a moment since they had stepped through the courtyard gate. They had indeed become like sisters, or at least friends, and in a sense, Rhona reminded her a lot of Caitrin, who was also good at taking the lead and putting others at ease.

Hamish led her to the same room where he had interrogated Allison after the Laird's death, and she found it hard to think clearly. Actually, she didn't want to be here.

Rhona closed the door behind them, right on Angus's nose. Then looked at Allison, nodded, and let go of her hand.

Hamish was sitting at the desk, and for some reason he didn't look as scary as he had in the courtyard. "Rhona," he said softly, sounding almost a little pleading.

She took three steps towards him, lashed out, and slapped him in the face.

Startled, Allison flinched. She expected Hamish to attack Rhona, but he only put a hand on his cheek and lowered his head. He looked like he was ashamed. But that couldn't be, could it? Allison was confused.

"How could you?" asked Rhona. "How dare you hurt Cailean and lock him up? You know very well that he would never betray you."

Allison began to realize why Rhona had wanted to go into the study. She was making sure he could save face in front of his men.

Hamish was silent for a while longer and then said, "Angus was the one who injured him. There was nothing I could do."

"Yes, there was, after all, you are his Laird, and he has to listen to you. And you ordered your men to go after Cailean. Yet he is as much one of your men as Angus is."

Hamish looked at her, and his expression turned defiant. "But he freed her," he nodded in Allison's direction, "and made off with her. What was I to make of that?"

"He did the right thing. You should never have locked Allison up just because she knew something about you that you didn't like."

Hamish turned pale. "What did she tell you?" he asked with apprehension.

Rhona shook her head impatiently. "She didn't have to tell me, I already knew."

Hamish stared at her, then abruptly turned away, walked over to the small window, and looked out. It seemed to take an eternity for him to answer, but Rhona waited patiently. Allison, on the other

hand, would have loved to turn into a mouse and get out of there. She admired Rhona's courage, but also suspected that these family ties within the clan were much more complex than she had imagined. Perhaps it was a bit like boarding school, where there were multiple layers of familiarity and hostility that no one who wasn't part of the system could understand. In any case, she was deeply confused by the way Rhona and Hamish interacted with each other.

Without looking at Rhona, he finally said, "And do you hate me now?"

She took a deep breath. "I've known all this for more than ten years, and you know I've always loved you. You're my second brother, Hamish. I couldn't hate you for that, could I? That's your business."

Hamish gave her a look that was somewhere between incredulity and hope, but said nothing.

Rhona folded her arms. "However, it's not your place to behave that way anymore."

She sounded like a strict mother.

Hamish did not answer but lowered his head.

Rhona continued, "I already told you that Allison is now part of our family, and therefore you need to get used to the idea that you will see her more often in the next few years. That is if you want Cailean to continue to remain here at the castle."

"Of course I do," Hamish grumbled. "And you know that very well."

"Good, then maybe it would be better if you apologized to Allison."

Allison gasped, and seeing Hamish's expression, she hastened to say, "He doesn't need to. Really. I've already forgotten about it. I know he meant nothing by it."

You could take things too far, she thought. And Rhona just went way over the top.

Hamish seemed disgruntled but also looked at her with surprise and renewed interest. It was as if he only now realized that she was in the room with him.

Allison forced herself to return his gaze, as she had come to realize that Rhona's words applied to her in reverse as well. If she wanted to stay with Cailean, she had to learn to live with Hamish.

On impulse, she said, "I'm sorry about the Laird. I happened to be there when he was choking, and I wanted to help him. I was trying to massage his heart to get it beating again. That's why I was kneeling on him."

Hamish's look told her he didn't understand what she was talking about, so she added, "I know it looked weird, but I really just wanted to help."

Hamish eyed her for quite a while longer, then said, "I know."

Relieved, Allison took a breath. "And the other..." She made a hand

gesture, not knowing how to paraphrase. "What I saw in the linen closet is not my business. And it doesn't bother me either. Nobody can help who they love."

Hamish's expression hardened again, but it had been important to Allison to say that. She didn't want him to be afraid of what she knew. Unfortunately, she could not very well tell him that love between men was no longer taboo in her time.

Finally, Hamish said, "And you love Cailean?" He eyed her from head to toe.

Astonished, Allison looked at him. It reminded her so much of Rhona's look when Cailean had first brought her to Freuchie Castle, and suddenly she realized that she had just been officially introduced to another branch of the family. She took a deep breath and withstood his scrutiny. "I do."

"And he her too?" Hamish said to Rhona.

She raised her shoulders and nodded. "Very much."

"And then what will happen to your plan for Cailean to marry Caitriona Cameron?"

Rhona sighed. "I can't help that my brother fell in love. And you also know how stubborn he is, we won't be able to change his mind."

"But then it doesn't look good for the alliance of clans in the West," Hamish said.

Rhona swallowed and hesitated for a long time before saying, "But since I'm marrying Malcolm Grant, we've come a long way."

Now she was the one who anxiously looked over at Hamish. His expression hardened again. "I'll never accept that," he said softly. "Never, do you hear me? Malcolm Grant is a son of a bitch."

Rhona winced, and red spots started forming on her neck. Following a gut instinct, Allison reached for her hand and squeezed it. "There's nothing you can do about it, though. I'm going to marry him."

"Then you are no longer welcome here," Hamish snapped at her.

Allison felt Rhona struggling to keep her composure. "You don't even know him," she said, "and you know full well that it would be beneficial to our plan to create stability here."

"And I have no intention of meeting him either," Hamish said. "But if you want to share that son of a bitch's bed for the sake of peace, go ahead. Just don't expect to be welcome here if you do."

Rhona looked exasperated. "Hamish, please think about this."

"There's nothing to think about."

Allison's mind was racing. Just a moment ago, things had seemed almost harmonious, and she had even begun to cautiously build some kind of a relationship with Hamish. How had things derailed so quickly? And what would it mean for her and Cailean if Hamish disowned Rhona? Some information was niggling in the back of her

mind, trying to get her attention. She actively pushed it aside. She had to help Rhona now.

She straightened her shoulders and said, "I've met Malcolm Grant, and he's a decent and upstanding man."

Hamish laughed bitterly. "You're a Grant yourself. Of course, you'd say such a thing."

"Cailean agrees."

"Allison, don't," Rhona gasped.

Hamish turned around slowly. "What are you saying?"

Now there was no turning back.

"I said that Cailean agreed that Malcolm was a decent man. Or his exact words were, 'not a bad guy.' He's glad Rhona managed to make peace between the clans in this way, even though it may not have been her intention."

"I don't believe in peace when it comes to Malcolm Grant. He can't be trusted. As soon as he thinks I trust him, he'll put a knife in my back."

"He would never do that," Rhona yelled.

Allison also didn't believe that Malcolm would do such a thing. The information in her head was becoming more present now, but Allison frowned. She didn't have time to worry about that now.

"That's just the way the Grants are," Hamish said. "They've always proven it, and it won't change in the future."

Hamish's words seemed to have flipped a switch, because suddenly Allison knew what the information was that so desperately was trying to get her attention. Previously, when Allison had looked up whether there had been a feud between the Grants and the Macleans, she had found nothing. On the contrary, the clans were said to be on friendly terms. And a Malcolm Grant—apparently all chiefs of that clan seemed to be called Malcolm—had even stood by the Macleans in a fight with the Macdonalds when victory seemed surely lost. But when exactly had that been? If she remembered correctly, it must have been in this century.

But how was she going to explain to Hamish where she had gotten this information?

"Rhona," she said softly, tugging on her hand.

"What is it?" she asked, looking at her in despair.

Allison bit her lip. "You know I have....," she hesitated, "Second sight. I can see things."

It took Rhona a moment to understand. Then she nodded. "Yes, I know that."

"And there's something I saw about the Grants and the Macleans."

"What?" asked Rhona breathlessly.

"There will be a feud between the Macleans and the Macdonalds."

She tried to remember the details. "It's about a marriage arranged between an Eileen Maclean and a John Macdonald."

Rhona looked over at Hamish, and Allison also dared a glance. Distrust had crept into his gaze.

"How do you know about that?"

Oh God, Allison thought, hopefully this hasn't happened already. But she couldn't remember the exact year, only roughly the century. But it had to have been this one.

"I have the second sight."

Hamish looked at her, his gaze cold. "Go on," he demanded.

Allison took a deep breath. There was no turning back now anyway. "The Macdonalds called off the wedding, allegedly spreading lies about the young woman, only to marry John off to the daughter of an archenemy of the Macleans."

"To whom?" asked Hamish curtly.

Allison gritted her teeth and prayed she had memorized this information correctly. "William Campbell."

Hamish's eyebrows shot up. "Damn Ian Macdonald!" he shouted all at once.

"What is it?" asked Rhona.

"I had conversations with Ian Macdonald just a few weeks ago about a marriage between his son and Ila."

Allison frowned, then figured it out. Ila wasn't her real name at all, but a nickname for Eileen. So, she did get it right. She exhaled with relief. But she was not dismissed so quickly.

"And what does all this have to do with Malcolm Grant?" asked Hamish, his eyes boring into her.

Allison nodded, this part was easier. "He was the one," she realized her mistake and quickly corrected it, "he's going to be the one to expose the betrayal and stand by the Macleans in the fight in Glen Brim against the Macdonalds."

There was silence in the room, then Rhona said, "I told you Malcolm was a good man. He's on your side, Hamish."

But he folded his arms and shook his head. "And what if she's making all this up?" He pointed his head at Allison.

"Hamish!" Rhona scolded. "She's family, why would she do something like that? And I know she has second sight. She can foresee things like this."

Hamish looked at her indecisively. Allison could sense he wasn't quite convinced yet.

"There's one more thing," she said.

"And that would be?"

Allison took a deep breath. "After John Macdonald rejects her, Ila will marry a man whose parentage is unknown. But she will bear him

four sons, and the eldest will succeed Ila's brother as Laird of the Macleans, as he remains unmarried throughout his life."

Allison's heart was racing, and suddenly she was very grateful for her memory, which stored information so reliably and always retrieved it at the right time. When she had originally read the text back, the unmarried Laird had not been named, and until just now, Allison had not known that Ila was the Eileen Maclean she had read about. But now, it was so easy to put two and two together. And now she knew firsthand why the Laird in question remained unmarried all his life.

Rhona gaped at her with her mouth open. "Is that true?" she asked.

Allison nodded. "I would never make something like that up."

Hamish stepped closer again, his face had changed. He was greedy for more. This was good. "What else do you know?" he asked.

Allison glanced at Rhona. "Rhona and Malcolm are going to have children."

Rhona involuntarily put a hand on her stomach.

"What else?" continued Hamish, but Allison just shrugged.

"That's all. For now, at least."

However, she was sure she could find out more if she went back to her time and investigated further.

"Maybe the second sight will come to me again."

"If that's true," Hamish said, nodding slowly, "this information can secure the future of our clan."

"You're right, Hamish," Rhona said. Then she took a deep breath. "Do you understand now why it's good if Allison stays with us and I marry Malcolm?"

Hamish pressed his lips together and Rhona took a step towards him. She put a hand on his arm. "I don't want to lose you, Hamish, but if you force me to make up my mind, I will go to Malcolm. But I'd feel much better if we managed to create the good relations Allison foresaw. And we can only do that together. You and Ila, me and Malcolm, and Cailean and Allison. We're stronger together."

Hamish took a deep breath. "I'll have to think about it."

But Allison could see from Rhona's smile that she had won, Hamish just wouldn't admit it yet.

"Do that," Rhona said. "But hurry up. And in the meantime, we'll free Cailean from his bonds. I swear to you, if he gets sick, you'll find out just how angry I can get."

"Don't worry, I know that," Hamish replied. Then he shrugged. "Cailean is in his room and he's not tied up because Ila was of the opinion that he would die otherwise. However, I had to lock his room because he threatened to make his way to Freuchie Castle. And now that the wound has healed to some extent, you can imagine the

amount of hell he's raising because he's not getting what he wants."

Allison's heart almost stopped when Hamish mentioned Cailean. So, he was going to be okay. She almost started to cry.

Rhona gave her a quick look that contained a clear, "Didn't I tell you that?" Then turned to Hamish and scowled. "And you're just telling us this now?"

"You didn't ask," he replied.

Rhona threw up her hands and turned toward the door. "Come on, Allison. I want to know if he's telling the truth."

But Allison was already at the door and running past the stunned Angus, who grabbed her by the arm and held her tight. She wriggled out of his grip with a kung-fu twist and ran down the hall. No one was going to stop her now.

Allison hurried up the stairs, and as she turned the corner, she almost tripped over a young man lying on the floor holding his nose. Blood was oozing between his fingers. Allison jumped over him and stood in front of the door to Cailean's room. It was open.

In the middle of the room stood a large tub with steaming hot water, and next to it stood a maid with an empty bucket. Startled, she looked at Allison. "He just ran away," she said, "knocked Gavin down and left. Do you even want me to prepare the bath now, milady?"

Allison looked around the room frantically. The bed was rumpled, and there was a plaid from Cailean on the chest, but no one was in the room except the maid. "When was that?" she cried.

"Just now, my lady. So, shall I get more buckets?"

Allison heard footsteps behind her. Rhona had just caught up with her. Apparently, she had grasped the situation immediately. She shook her head. "So, if he managed to knock Gavin down, he can't be doing that badly," she said dryly.

"Where did he go?" Allison asked her, turning back to the door.

"Maybe to the courtyard? He won't get far."

Allison ran back down the stairs. The wide skirts hindered her running and she was worried about Cailean. But most of all, she didn't want him to disappear again, now that she had just arrived. She couldn't wait another minute.

She had just reached the corridor with the Great Hall when she saw a familiar figure standing there. He was holding onto the wall and bent over, gasping for breath.

"Cailean," she called out and kept running. Again she called his name.

He turned around and when he recognized her, he also started moving, but much slower. She had so much momentum that she almost collided with him and almost knocked him over. As he wrapped his arms around her, they staggered, about to fall. It felt almost like the moment when she pressed the amulet in the notch and the world began to spin. But then they caught themselves and the

world stood still again. Incredibly still. It seemed like only the two of them were left.

Cailean wrapped his arms tightly around her and Allison clung to him. Suddenly she began to sob, although she could tell that he was fine.

"Shh," he murmured into her hair. "We'll be okay now."

Allison pressed tighter against him and shook her head. "No," she said through sobs, "we already are."

He leaned back a little so that he could take her face in his hands. "I should never have let you go. I was terrified for you."

Allison smiled through her tears. "I felt the same way." She took a deep breath. "Are you okay?" At least he was on his feet.

He shook his head. "Yes and no."

Alarmed, Allison asked, "Why no?"

"Because I don't even have enough strength left to pick you up and take you home. And that's what I'd most like to do right now."

"Do you have enough strength to kiss me though?" Allison asked.

He smiled. "There's always enough for that, even if it would be the last thing I do," he said.

Slowly, he leaned forward and very gently placed his lips on hers. Allison closed her eyes and sighed. Cailean gently ran his tongue over her lips. She felt that wonderful tingling sensation whenever Cailean kissed her. She opened her lips and let his tongue in. She couldn't remember ever feeling anything more beautiful.

A clearing of the throat interrupted her, but Cailean only slowly detached himself from her and looked deeply into her eyes for another moment. Only then did he lift his gaze. "Rhona," he said, not sounding the least bit surprised.

"I see that you are well again. I didn't need to come after all."

Cailean shrugged. "I'm very grateful that you, or probably more accurately, you both, escorted Allison back safely."

Rhona raised an eyebrow. "I needed to talk to Hamish anyway."

It sounded like it was nothing, and Allison still snuggled up to Cailean, had to smile. Rhona looked at her briefly and returned the smile. But before she could say anything, she heard a voice behind her.

"Why didn't you tell me you got married? I did expect that as your Laird, or at least as your brother, I should be the first to know."

Hamish moved behind Rhona and stared belligerently at Cailean. Allison's exuberance immediately diminished. Although Hamish no longer frightened her, she didn't feel comfortable around him either. She very much hoped that would subside.

"Married?" asked Cailean in wonder, holding Allison a little tighter.

Hamish frowned. "Your sister said that she..."

He nodded in Allison's direction and Rhona said sternly, "Her name is Allison."

Hamish sighed and continued. "That she's your wife."

Allison felt Cailean tense up a little, and her heart sank. Maybe he didn't want to marry her. She wanted to turn to him and explain that she hadn't been the one who claimed to be his wife, but Cailean pulled her even closer, if that was even possible, and put his other arm around her as well.

"That's right, Allison is my wife."

"And why am I just finding out about this now?"

Cailean snorted in amusement. "I'm afraid the right opportunity hadn't presented itself after my return."

Now the corner of Hamish's mouth twitched, and Allison was amazed to see his face change. For the first time, she could understand a little of what Rhona and Cailean saw in him. Maybe, like Malcolm, he wasn't such a bad guy.

"Did he," Hamish nodded his head in Rhona's direction, "join you by Handfast? Or maybe a priest?"

This time it was Cailean who said, "His name is Malcolm. And no, he didn't join us by Handfast. And before you ask, she's still my wife, under God, even if we haven't sworn that in front of anyone yet."

Hamish grumbled something and Allison thought she heard the word conditionally. Then he nodded to Cailean. "Take the bath Ila is having prepared for you now, and then come back into the hall. And wear something fresh." Then he looked at Allison and took a deep breath. "And you too, Allison."

He turned and left. Speechless, Allison stared after him.

Rhona snapped her out of her thoughts. "I think he's right. You could do with a bath, brother. Have you even washed since the fire at Freuchie Castle? I get the feeling you still smell like smoke. And other things."

She wrinkled her nose.

Cailean grimaced. "Thank you, sister."

"I'm just telling the truth." She smiled. "And now I'm taking Allison with me so she can change for the ceremony in peace."

Only now did Allison realize what would happen later in the hall, and suddenly her knees went weak. Cailean held her tightly, and she leaned against him. Was it really true that she would soon marry this man? And that Hamish would officiate their vows?

"Allison's coming with me," she heard Cailean say.

"But she needs a dress, and I need to clean her up a bit."

"Well, go get one of yours out of the house. Besides, I'm sure there's someone waiting there for you now that Hamish gave you his blessing."

Rhona's eyes snapped open. "How do you know?"

"Because Hamish would never let you rebuke him like that if he was still mad at you. Now go on. I'm sure your husband's waiting for you."

A smile spread across Rhona's face, and Allison realized that she had finally just received the blessing from her brother she craved. Allison understood how she felt because when Rhona had called her her sister-in-law, she had felt the same.

Rhona took a step forward and hugged Cailean so hard she almost crushed Allison, who was still leaning against him. Then she kissed Allison's cheek. "Thank you for everything," she whispered, "I'm going to choose my most beautiful dress for you."

And then she was gone.

When her footsteps had faded, Cailean cleared his throat. "You heard my sister and the Laird, I need to bathe now. Would you come with me and wash my hair?"

Allison looked up at him and returned his smile. "Aren't you still a little weak for that?"

He shook his head. "Ila took good care of me. According to your instructions, she told me. So, would you do me the honor and," he kissed her gently on the mouth, "help me with my bath?"

Allison ran her tongue over her lips to taste more of his kiss. "That depends on how much time we have."

Cailean bent down and kissed her again. This time he took a little more time and gently stroked her lips with his tongue. "We'll slide the latch. Then we'll have all the time in the world."

Epilogue

Lauren pulled the lemon tart out of the oven and looked around. She couldn't find room to place it anywhere. It was time for Allison to arrive again; she couldn't bake any more. Caitrin's freezer, which was pretty empty when Lauren got there, could barely close now. But as long as Allison was gone and Lauren didn't know what had happened to her, she couldn't help but bake. Besides, it distracted her from thinking about the painting.

She couldn't believe she had really told Allison about it. Although she shared almost all of her secrets with her friends, she had never told them about this portrait and the feelings it triggered in her. Until Caitrin had told them about time travel, Lauren hadn't realized how much it actually meant to her either. If she was honest with herself, she realized that she had compared every man she considered dating to the man in the portrait. Yet, she didn't actually know anything about him. But she measured all men by the feelings that this man had sparked in her. And none had ever come close. Only her ex, Craig, who had lied to her for months that he was already married, had come close.

Frustrated, she pushed aside a basket of rolls and a chocolate cake and placed the tart there.

"I think we should have a bake sale. I'm sure the people from the village would love it," a voice broke in. Jenna snagged a bun and smiled at Lauren. "Still so anxious?"

"Don't you think it's terrible that we haven't heard from Allison at all?"

Jenna shrugged. "Yes, but we don't have any choice but to wait."

She was always so pragmatic.

"Aren't you worried at all?"

"About Allison, no. I've never seen her so determined. I'm sure the Highlanders of the 16th century are more afraid of her than the other way around."

Lauren blew a strand of hair out of her face and thought about her conversation with Allison in the kitchen, the night before she had left again. True, she had been very determined and you could literally feel

her love for the man. Still though, Lauren had been surprised that Allison hadn't immediately advised her to travel back in time as well. Normally, she was the one who always rushed things. This time, Lauren felt like she was the one acting too hastily. And that's why she had so much baking to do. It reassured her.

"I've never seen Allison so much in love," Jenna said.

Lauren raised her eyebrows. "Nor I you."

To her surprise, a fine blush covered Jenna's otherwise pale face. "I never expected to feel something like this. It's almost like a fairy tale." She gazed pensively out the window at the garden, which looked even greener in the drizzle. "Caitrin said once that the love between two people from different times is very different and much bigger than what you'd experience here. And now I know she's right. That's why I'm not worried about Allison."

Lauren felt her throat tighten and had to turn away. She pretended she had to wipe down the sink, even though she had cleaned it a long time ago. She had only realized a few days ago that she was the only one who hadn't traveled yet, and she was also the only one who didn't feel that deep love for a man from the past. Jenna had Evan, Allison had Cailean, hopefully, and Caitrin was in the process of finding Finlay again. And she only had a painting. She was envious of her friends' love, and envy was a feeling she had never felt before. She was ashamed of that.

She wondered if she should tell Jenna that she was also thinking about traveling. She was sure she'd understand, she had become much more understanding of such things ever since she found Evan. But if she told Jenna, she had to talk to Caitrin about it too, because anything else wouldn't be fair. But she wasn't ready for that yet. Because then who would be the gatekeeper if Caitrin left too? And how could Lauren stand in her way when she was so close to finding the man she loved after so many years. The man she had thought had died. Just the thought of what it would do to Caitrin if she wanted to travel now, too, made her nauseous.

She jumped when Jenna suddenly put a hand on her shoulder. "Are you still sad about Craig?"

Lauren blinked in confusion, then shook her head. "I almost never think about him at all. Ever since all this happened, he just hasn't been important." She lifted her shoulders. "But now I think it's ridiculous how in love I was with him and how much I obsessed and cried about it."

Jenna wrapped her arms around her, and Lauren enjoyed that her friend was no longer the businesswoman who they never saw and was only concerned with her projects. Now she was their close friend again, wearing summer dresses and jeans, not always on her cell all

the time, laughing with them and even hugging them sometimes, just like she was doing now. It was a relief to have the real Jenna back.

"That's never ridiculous," Jenna said. "But I think I know what you mean. Ever since I've known Evan, I've wondered what I saw in every other man I've ever been with. It's such a deeper connection with Evan."

Lauren looked out the window and sighed. "And Allison had the exact same look as you when you look at Evan. I would love that too."

Jenna was silent, and Lauren was grateful to her for not saying what they were both thinking. Since Lauren could feel the stone, she must be able to travel, and there probably was a man waiting for her in the other time. If only she dared.

"This is not a good combination at all," Caitrin said, suddenly standing right next to them.

Lauren turned to see her friend cutting herself a huge piece of the chocolate cake. "What do you mean?"

"I'm researching all day, which is boring and upsetting at the same time. With all the frustration and excitement, I get hungry, well, the munchies, and unfortunately, the whole kitchen is full of delicious cakes. If this keeps up, I won't be able to fit into my clothes when I want to travel again."

Guilt flashed through Lauren so violently that she winced. Jenna noticed, but she misinterpreted it. "It's not your fault if Caitrin can't control herself." She stroked Caitrin's cheek. "However, I think a few extra pounds looks very good on you. You've lost quite a bit of weight over the past few years."

Caitrin bit into her piece of chocolate cake. "When you're depressed, you just can't eat much. But since now I know Finlay most likely made it to New York, everything tastes better again."

Her eyes shone with just as much love as Jenna's. Lauren thought about Allison and how she had also looked like that when she had returned home for that one night. Everything inside her contracted, but she didn't let on. Even though her friends sometimes worried about the men they loved, they were so sure of themselves. It was such an incredibly deep connection that not even separation over centuries could destroy.

And what about her? She had fallen in love with a painting and didn't dare to find out what was really behind it. How pathetic.

Jenna also cut herself a piece of chocolate cake. "Have you discovered anything else yet?" she asked Caitrin.

She shook her head. "I've looked through so many lists; my head is spinning. I think I've found him on a list here and there, but there's so much data I don't even know where to start. I really miss Allison for all this. She just has so much more experience with this type of

research."

Jenna tilted her head. "How do you know if it really is him on the lists?"

Caitrin shrugged. "There must have been other Finlay Macleans in New York and on the East Coast, but when I see his name, somehow I feel it really is him. I can't tell you why, though."

"Does your amulet tingle?"

Caitrin shook her head. "No, I just know."

Now, Lauren thought. Now was the right time. She was about to open her mouth when Jenna's phone rang. Lauren bit her lip and turned away. Of course... it would probably never be the right time.

Jenna at first wanted to swipe the call away, but then asked, "Is it okay if I answer? It's Evan."

"Sure," Caitrin said, "I have to get going anyway."

Jenna picked up and took a few steps away from the others.

Caitrin turned to Lauren. "Is everything okay? You look so serious."

But before Lauren could answer, Jenna whirled around. "It's Allison!"

"What?" exclaimed Lauren and Caitrin in unison.

"Where is she?" asked Lauren and Caitrin said, "Is she okay?"

Jenna nodded. "Do you want to talk to her?" She held the phone out.

"No," Caitrin said, "I want to see her." She was already hurrying to the door.

But Lauren picked up the phone, her heart pounding. "Allison?"

"Hey, sweetie, am I interrupting your baking?"

Lauren closed her eyes and let her friend's voice flow through her. She was only peripherally aware of Jenna following Caitrin into the garden. "No," she whispered, "I don't need to do that anymore."

"That means I don't get cake? I've been looking forward to that all along."

Again, Lauren had to smile. "You can have the biggest cake ever."

She could literally hear Allison grinning. "By the time I get to the house, though, you probably wouldn't be able to make one. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"Why so long?" The path from the stone was actually not very far.

"I arrived at the castle. I wanted to see if I could manage to travel directly to Caitrin's house instead of to the stone, but somehow it didn't work out. Evan found me up here."

"Oh," Lauren said. "Jenna and Caitrin just ran out to the stone."

"I'm already on my way down. Evan is coming with me. But he keeps asking if I'm hurt and looking at me strangely."

Lauren could hear snorting in the background.

"Well, you didn't look too good the last time you arrived," Lauren

said. "We were all worried."

Allison laughed. "Honey, you don't have to worry about me. You know that. If you knew how many dangerous research trips I've done, you'd know that these trips into the past are a snap."

They were silent for a moment, and Lauren enjoyed having her friend close again. She knew this trip had not been a breeze for Allison, but that's just the way Allison was.

Suddenly she said: "Here come Jenna and Caitrin up ahead. Man, am I glad to see you all."

"Is everything okay?" Lauren asked quietly.

"Very much so," Allison said. "I'll tell you all about it the minute we're all together in the kitchen."

"Should I make you something to eat?"

"Sure. I look forward to your cooking the entire time I'm away. Nothing against oatmeal and cold roast, but sometimes it gets monotonous." She sighed, and Lauren heard her turn. "Evan, cover your ears."

Lauren had to smile.

"Cover properly, don't eavesdrop," Allison instructed him. Then her voice got louder again as she put the phone to her ear. "Quick, before the others get here. I want you to hear it first."

Lauren's heart beat faster. "Hear what?"

"If you're going to bake me the biggest cake in the world, can you make it into a wedding cake? Because there is something to celebrate."

Lauren held her breath and her heart leapt with joy. "Of course," she whispered, "I'm so happy for you."

"And I'm the first one," Allison said with a laugh, "but no crying now!"

Stealthily, Lauren wiped a tear from her cheek. "I'm not crying."

"Yes, you always do, and you're not a good liar either. But just between us, I cried at my wedding too."

Then Lauren heard Caitrin and Jenna's voice in the background.

"I'll see you in a bit, sweetie," Allison said.

Before hanging up, Lauren heard Caitrin say, "Why are you covering your ears?" And then Evan laughed.

Lauren leaned against the kitchen counter and closed her eyes. She was finally back. And everything had gone well. Allison was a married woman now. Lauren had never thought she'd see that happen. But that's just how things change.

Allison sounded so happy. As if she had finally arrived where she had always wanted to be. And at that moment, Lauren knew it was time for her to go, too.

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Chapter One of Book 3 in the Series: Lauren

Lauren stared at the sign, and her heart skipped a beat. "Gallery closed due to water damage. Please visit our gardens. Entrance on the left."

But she had to see his painting! For days, she had been unable to think of anything but the man in the painting. The portrait that had haunted her for more than fifteen years. Time and time again, she had put off coming here because she told herself it wasn't real. But eventually, she had been unable to resist the urge to make the trip. And now it was closed. She fought down her tears and turned away.

A workman carrying several copper pipes walked past her, gave her an appraising look, then disappeared through the entrance of Kinloch Hall. He left the door open, and Lauren followed him with her gaze. He climbed the stairs, then turned left. Her stomach tightened. She wondered if that's where the water damage was and if something may have happened to the painting. It was actually hanging upstairs in the very room where the man had disappeared into. What if the painting had been destroyed? That thought was so terrible that she had to fight down a wave of panic.

The door was still open, and Lauren wondered whether she could take a quick peek inside, just to make sure the picture was okay. Once she knew for sure, she could wait. Then, she would just return when the gallery reopened. But she knew that if she didn't check to see how he was doing, she wouldn't have any peace of mind. Nonsense, she corrected herself. She wanted to know if the painting was okay, not him. It was just a painting. But sometimes, she wasn't really sure of that anymore. For her, this man in the painting had become alive so many times in her dreams that it was no longer just an oil painting.

And that's why she was doing something now that she would normally never do otherwise. She was going to break a rule.

Cautiously, she placed one foot over the threshold and immediately felt like a criminal. But she bravely put the next foot forward and moments later hurried up the stairs. She would only take one quick look and then would leave again. No one would even notice she had been here.

Fortunately, she had been to Kinloch Hall only two weeks ago and knew where the painting was hanging. She turned the corner, entered the green room, and froze. The room was empty except for a woman discussing something with the workman. Not a single painting hung on the walls anymore, and loud drying equipment stood in the room. Lauren shuddered. Why hadn't it been one of the other rooms?

The woman smiled and approached her. She was probably in her mid or late forties and seemed friendly but firm. "Excuse me," she said in a strong Scottish accent. "The exhibition is closed. But you're welcome to look at the gardens. They're especially beautiful today."

At that moment, Lauren realized again what she had done. She had broken a rule, and this woman had caught her. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, I drove two hours just to look at the portraits." She took a deep breath. "It's terrible about the water damage. Are all the paintings in the room affected, then?"

The woman looked at her intently. "You were here just a short time ago, weren't you?" She turned and pointed to a spot where a dark green sofa had stood two weeks ago. "You sat there for several hours."

Oh God, Lauren thought, had she been that conspicuous? She wondered if that wasn't allowed? Slowly she nodded, "I hope that was all right."

The woman smiled. "Of course it is. It's rare when someone lingers in these rooms for such a long time. Actually, I really don't understand that at all. If I had the time, I would also sit in front of the paintings, studying them intently for hours."

Lauren knew right then that she had found a kindred spirit. "My name is Lauren Forrester," she said, extending her hand to the woman.

She grabbed her hand. "Euphemia Macdonell. I'm in charge of the artwork collection."

Lauren smiled. "What a wonderful position, Miss Macdonell. I find this collection fascinating. I saw it once when I visited Kinloch Hall in tenth grade and was pleased to see the paintings on display again a few weeks ago. I found the new framing, and also the way they were hung, fascinating. That's why I stayed for such a long time."

That wasn't quite true because she had actually spent several hours staring at only the one painting and not paying attention to any of the others.

The woman smiled. "Ah, I knew you'd be well-informed. Hardly anyone spends that much time in a collection of paintings unless they are really interested. Are you in the profession? And please call me Euphemia. Not exactly a modern name either, but I always feel like my mother when someone calls me Miss Macdonell."

"Sure. I'm Lauren." Then she shook her head. "I was an art history major, but I don't work in the field."

Euphemia sighed. "I can understand that. You end up doing so many different things than you'd expect. For example, right now, I have to work with these contractors to determine how to repair the damage as quickly as possible so that the paintings can be displayed again soon. And, to do it in a way that doesn't cause more damage to them."

Lauren glanced over to where his picture had been and was suddenly breathless. "Is there a lot of damage?"

The other woman nodded regretfully. "Water poured over some of the paintings. Others, however, were fine." She sighed. "And it's so hard to find a restorer who can assess the damage, let alone one who can save the paintings. It's probably going to cost a fortune. You don't know anyone in that field, perhaps?"

But Lauren couldn't answer. The fear that his portrait had been destroyed was so great that she couldn't speak.

Euphemia frowned and took Lauren by the arm. "Is everything all right, Lauren?"

She tried to nod but couldn't manage it. "I'm a little dizzy."

"It's probably the humidity in here. The drying equipment is running all the time, but it's a losing battle. Why don't you come with me and you can sit down for a while? I'm finished here for now anyway."

Lauren took a shaky breath. "Please, could I possibly see the paintings? Are they still here?"

Euphemia smiled. "But of course. You're a specialist, and I always like to talk shop about our collection. That's actually what I'm supposed to be doing here, instead of telling the workmen which pipes should go where."

Lauren couldn't take it anymore. "That one picture," she pointed to where it had been hanging, "the portrait of the dark-haired man with the dark green background. The one looking to the side. Has it been damaged?" Her voice trembled, and she felt a little ashamed of it. She felt like a teenager talking about her latest crush.

For a moment, Euphemia thought, then her face brightened. "I know which one you mean. The smaller one, isn't it?"

Lauren raised her shoulders and nodded. She hadn't looked that closely at the other pictures, but she remembered that a huge full-body portrait of another man had been mounted right next to it. Many of the other visitors had stopped in front of it in amazement. But she meant the smaller one, where a man was looking over his shoulder away from the viewer into the distance, apparently standing somewhere in the landscape.

"That one's also one of my favorites," Euphemia continued in a chatty tone, "even though most people seem to find the large portrait

more impressive." She bobbed up and down on her toes. "No, the paintings on this side of the room were not damaged. Although, we still had to take them down and move them somewhere else so we could dry everything here."

Lauren's relief was so great that her knees almost buckled. She reached out and held onto the wall.

"Oh dear, you really are not well. Come with me." Euphemia took Lauren by the arm and led her out of the room.

A short time later, they entered a large hall that was bright and cool, with tons of paintings leaning against the walls. Some lay on large tables covered with white sheets. Lauren's eyes darted over the paintings, but she couldn't spot him anywhere.

And then she saw the powerful portrait that had hung right next to his.

Euphemia led her to the dark green sofa that stood under a window and had apparently found refuge up here as well. But Lauren shook her head. "May I see the portrait?"

"You seem to be quite taken with it."

Lauren smiled. "Haven't you ever had that experience with a painting?"

Many art lovers felt drawn to one specific painting, a painting that resonated so much with them that they lost all sense of time.

Euphemia nodded and sighed, "Yes, I have." Her look became wistful for a moment. Then she pointed to the corner where the large portrait stood. "Over there is the painting you're looking for."

Euphemia pulled away the sheets, and Lauren was surprised to see she had simply set aside two landscapes and a portrait of a woman and leaned them up against the wall. It was as if they were just ordinary framed family photos. Yet these paintings, at least some of them, had to be quite valuable.

Then finally, as Euphemia pulled another sheet aside, Lauren saw it. Her picture. His picture. It was on the floor, right next to the large portrait. Her heart leapt, and she stared at the familiar face. He was looking over his shoulder with a serious expression, and, as always, she felt like at any moment, he would turn his head to look at her. Sometimes, she couldn't even look away because she was afraid that she might miss that.

She sighed and squatted down how she had longed for him. The last time she had been here, she had furtively taken a photo of the painting, but it was not the same as seeing it for real. Her fingers were tingling so much that she had to fight the urge to touch the painting.

She felt the other woman watching her intently. "You really like this one a lot."

Lauren shrugged and got back to her feet. "I'm not sure why, but

yes, I really do."

Of course, she knew why, or at least she suspected the reason, and now that she was so close to the painting, it was reinforced. The amulet she had been wearing around her neck for several weeks tingled whenever she looked at the portrait. She involuntarily put her hand on the necklace, still remembering the exact moment when her friend had given it to her. She had promised to be the temporary gatekeeper, which was the only reason she had agreed to wear the amulet. It was a sign to other time travelers so that they would recognize her as someone who would help them after they arrived. But now, she felt the pull to travel too. Ever since she wore it, the longing for this man in the portrait had intensified. She knew she would travel to him if only she dared to go back in time. But this thought frightened her beyond belief. Not only the journey itself but also of the moment when they would meet. What would it be like to come face to face with him? What was he like? And above all, who was he?

Suddenly a thought occurred to her. This woman was in charge of the artwork collection. If anyone knew his story, it would be her. Her hands immediately started sweating as she turned to Euphemia. "It's a little silly, but I first saw this painting in tenth grade, and it's been in my thoughts ever since. Yet I don't even know who the man in the painting is."

Euphemia tilted her head slightly. "Does that matter? Isn't it much more important to know who painted it?"

Lauren blinked. For some reason, she hadn't thought of it that way before. "But the painter is unknown. At least that's what the sign next to the painting said at the time."

She remembered her disappointment clearly when she had wanted more information about the painting, and the sign only said, "Painter unknown, ca. 1800."

Euphemia Macdonell smiled. "We've researched it since then," she told her, and Lauren could hear the pride in her voice. "And we think we can now better match some of these paintings."

"Really?" asked Lauren breathlessly. She had always assumed that an unknown painter would always remain anonymous. There were so many anonymous paintings, especially in the smaller castles throughout England and Scotland.

Euphemia nodded. "We determined the name of the painter after we discovered who the man in the painting is."

Lauren wrung her hands. "Even for mine?" She bit her lip. "I mean, for this painting here?" She pointed to the smaller painting on the floor and resisted the urge to crouch down for a closer look.

"His name is Sir Edward Bryden," Euphemia said but looked over at

the large painting.

"And who is the man in the smaller painting?" asked Lauren. Her heart was beating so loudly that she was afraid she would miss what Euphemia was saying.

The latter raised her eyebrows. "That's what I just said. Sir Edward Bryden."

Lauren stared at the painting and tried to match that name to him, but it didn't work. It didn't fit. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"Pretty sure. We've done incredible detective work. There's hardly any evidence about this man, but we found a picture of him in Edinburgh as a young man, and we know that he then married a woman from the Highlands who had inherited extensive land holdings. He came here and managed that property. So, he was a Lowlander who settled in the Highlands during the time of the Clearances. That's why he wears that strange mixture of Highland dress with pants."

She sounded a little dismissive toward him. Lauren knew that many Highlanders were still resentful, even today, because of the Highland Clearances and the role the Lowlanders had played during that time. But Lauren's stomach tied in knots on hearing a very different, very important piece of information that Euphemia mentioned.

She stared at the painting. He was married? He didn't look married. And it didn't feel that way to her either.

Euphemia pointed to the large portrait. "He seemed to have enjoyed his power. The way he was portrayed shows that. Yet, it wasn't really this painter's style to portray people in that manner. This obsession with power."

Lauren stared at the large portrait, in which a man, also dark blond, looked haughtily at the painter. There was something cold, almost cruel, about his expression. "That's not the same man," she blurted out as she looked back and forth between the two paintings.

"But we are very sure," Euphemia objected. But Lauren was also just as sure. Euphemia pointed to both pictures. "And look at the resemblance in the face. It has to be Sir Edward Bryden in both paintings."

Lauren took a deep breath and continued looking back and forth. Yes, it was true. Both men had dark blond hair, an oval face and were definitely handsome. "But their facial expressions are so different."

"Maybe it's because the larger painting was completed after his wife died, and the other one was painted while she was still alive. After all, it could be that he was grieving for her, and that's why he looks so sad. They did have four children together."

Everything inside Lauren tightened, and she didn't know which

piece of information to grab first to process. "His wife died?"

Euphemia nodded. "Yes, during the birth of her fourth child. And look," she pointed to the large portrait, "there's so much space next to him. The proportions don't make sense. It's as if someone else should be standing there. Maybe it would have been his wife, but then she passed away? Or maybe the artist left that space empty on purpose to indicate that the woman was missing from his life and the space was now empty."

For the first time, Lauren looked at the large painting with an artist's eye. She understood exactly what Euphemia had said because there was indeed something missing in the painting. However, she was not sure if the artist had actually created it to suggest a deep emotional connection between Edward Bryden and his wife. That seemed to be more of a modern way of looking at it. Still, the painting was somehow unfinished and inconsistent. Which, of course, made it quite interesting.

Lauren looked over at a portrait of a lady that was placed next to the two landscape paintings. Her practiced eye told her that the painting was by the same painter as the nearly life-size one of Edward Bryden. "Is that her?" she asked, suddenly feeling a bit ridiculous at the jealousy rising within her.

"Oh no, that's probably his sister. Lady Helen Bryden. She lived with him in the Highlands. But that's all we know about her."

"But the painting is by the same artist, isn't it?"

"Yes, just like the two landscapes."

Lauren stepped in front of the sister's painting and looked at her. She had not noticed this painting in the exhibition before either. "The painter liked her. More than him, at least." She pointed to the man with the ambitious expression. Briefly, her eyes roamed over her beloved painting, and again she didn't think that it could be the same man. Or had this painting actually been completed when Edward Bryden was still in love with his wife? The thought pained her. For some reason, she had assumed that she would be the woman he loved. Yes, it was silly, but ever since she had seen what had happened to her friends when they had fallen in love with men from other times, she had realized that there could be this deep, strong, unconditional love. And she had been so sure that the man in that painting was the man she was destined to be with. Why else had she fallen in love with him when she was sixteen? Not with the picture, but actually with him?

She was so lost in thought that she almost missed what Euphemia said.

"You really have a good eye for this kind of thing. I've never thought about that before. But it's true. Maybe the artist was in love

with the lady."

Lauren smiled. "That's entirely possible. He really hit it off, and the way she smiles at him could mean she felt something for him, too."

Somehow, it had always been clear to her when an artist painted someone they loved or hated or someone who meant nothing to them and whose portrait was just a commissioned work. You could see it in the result.

She turned to Euphemia, "You said you may know who the artist was?"

Her face lit up. "Yes, and it's quite possible that he was in love with Lady Helen. His name is Robert Bryden, a second cousin of theirs."

Lauren searched her memory for what she knew about Scottish artists, and for some reason, the name seemed familiar. "Aren't his paintings exhibited in London? I remember a very successful portrait of an elderly man skating."

Euphemia Macdonell clapped her hands. "It's incredible what all you know. And what a shame you don't work in the art field. It's true. He published many unusual portraits. But he lived a very secluded life and hardly participated in public art life. That's why not much is known about him. We discovered his connection with Sir Edward Bryden only by chance. But it is possible that he also lived in Scotland for a time. As far as we know, his style changed a lot over the years, and these are his first works. That's why they're not as clearly attributable."

Lauren thought of the painting of the gentleman skating and nodded. It was almost a reportage style, and these are simple portraits. But he clearly liked Lady Helen a lot.

"Did they get married?"

Euphemia Macdonell shrugged. "We don't know. He was married and had children, some of whom also went on to careers as artists, but nothing else is known about him." Her eyes twinkled. "And you know what? While researching, I found out that he's probably one of my ancestors, which means I could have gotten my artistic disposition from him."

Lauren smiled, but she had to force herself to listen to the woman as her mind kept drifting back to the information she had just received. "That's really exciting. What a shame you don't know more about him."

Euphemia shrugged. "As I said, apparently, he lived a very secluded life and deliberately shunned publicity. But his works are great. Something very special, if I may say so. Objectively, of course."

Lauren let her gaze glide over the paintings again. Once again, it lingered on her favorite painting. She knew it so well, but now that she knew more about the man in the painting, he seemed more

foreign to her than he had before when her imagination had filled in all the blanks. She looked at the brush strokes and the incidence of light and crouched down again to look at the painting more closely. Something was not right.

"Were these paintings all completed at the same time?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, we don't know. But probably yes. They are all undated, but judging by the age of Sir Edward Bryden and his sister, they must date from 1807 to 1815. After that, the artist left for London."

Lauren looked at the portrait again, and her gut told her something was wrong. "Are you sure they're all by the same artist?"

The answer came quickly. "Yes. Because they have been in the Macdonell family since that time and all inherited together. The three portraits and the two landscapes. Also, the canvases and frames are from the same maker. An art supply store in Edinburgh. There is a stamp on the back of the paintings."

Lauren would have loved to ask if she could see one, but she knew that these paintings were far too valuable to simply take out of the frames. And with the large portrait, that would mean an undertaking of several hours.

She rose. "I'm still not convinced the smaller portrait is by the same artist."

"We are very sure. Especially since we know that Robert Bryden changed his style several times over the years, probably it was the same here. He may have been trying different techniques of painting." She smiled. "And if I may use your words, perhaps he liked Sir Edward Bryden very much at first, and then the relationship between them cooled. Maybe he just didn't like him anymore when he painted the big portrait. It's quite possible, after all, if he was perhaps unhappily in love with the latter's sister." But then she waved that off. "Oh, that's pure speculation. We know far too little about these people for that. But it's actually a shame, isn't it? I would have loved to have met him. He must have been a fascinating man."

Lauren realized Euphemia was talking about the artist, while all she could think about was getting to know the man in the painting because she knew they had a special connection. And who knew, maybe another woman had come into his life later and softened his features again as in the smaller, first portrait. And maybe she was that woman.

This thought caused the familiar fluttering in her stomach. She wanted so much to be that woman. She wanted him to look at her the way he did in that portrait.

A young man stepped into the room and beckoned to Euphemia. "The workmen have a question about the pipes."

Euphemia rolled her eyes. "And already the fun is over, and I have to get back to the renovation work. And I could have chatted with you for hours."

Lauren stood up and said, "I feel the same way. Thank you for letting me see the paintings. And thank you for all the information, too."

To be honest, she needed time alone now to process all of this. She was glad about the interruption.

As Euphemia flipped the sheets back over the paintings, Lauren took one last look at the familiar face. "Do you know when you'll be opening again?"

The other woman shook her head and covered the landscapes. "Renovation work in such an old house is tedious. But we'll do our best. Maybe give me your contact information, and I can notify you when we're done." She turned to the window. "Oh, look! The sun is coming out. It's about time. I can't take any more water right now."

She went to the window sill, where some pieces of paper and pens were lying, and held them out to Lauren. She quickly wrote down her address and turned just as Euphemia was about to cover the portrait of Lady Helen. Perhaps it was the different light, now that the sun was shining into the room, or it was a different angle, but Lauren's gaze fell on Lady Helen's neck. She was wearing a piece of jewelry, and something about it niggled at Lauren.

"Wait," she said and moved closer. She squatted on the floor in front of the lady and stared at her neck. It took her a moment, but then she recognized it and finally understood why her necklace had started to tingle. It was the same amulet. Caitrin's amulet. That of the gatekeeper and all time travelers.

Lauren gasped.

"Is everything all right? Are you not feeling well again?"

"No," Lauren hurried to say because she didn't want to draw Euphemia's attention to the amulet. "I'm just really amazed by the painting. I should have looked at it longer." She decided to take a chance because she had to show Caitrin and Jenna this painting, and as far as she knew, no catalog of the exhibition existed. "May I take a picture of it?"

Now it was Euphemia who hesitated. "All right. But if anyone asks, I didn't give you permission. You know, of course, that you shouldn't use flash, right?"

Lauren lifted up the sheet, knelt down, and took a picture of the painting. "Lady Helen Bryden, you said, didn't you? And she was the sister of Sir Edward Bryden?"

Euphemia nodded. "Yes, I suppose she came with him when he moved to the Highlands."

"And that must have been around 1807 to 1815?"

"Probably."

"And she came from Edinburgh?"

Again, Euphemia shrugged. "Probably, yes. But we don't know much about her. Actually, only that."

Lauren realized she was getting ahead of herself, and suddenly she wished her friend Allison was here. She had been a journalist in her former life, before she had moved to the 16th century, and was better at asking clever questions to get a lot more information out of people. But maybe Euphemia really didn't know more.

"Thank you. It's been an extraordinary time here for me. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to spend with me."

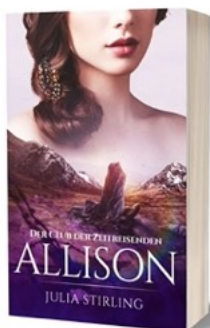
Euphemia's cheeks turned red. "No worries," she waved it off. "I love to talk about these things, and I have far too little opportunity to do so. Feel free to come back soon. As soon as we open, that is. Then, you can look at Lady Helen in peace for hours."

Lauren smiled. "I will." But it occurred to her that she might meet Lady Helen before then. And her beau, this artist, perhaps, too. And then, of course, there was Sir Edward. Again her stomach fluttered.

Now that she realized Lady Helen must have known about the time travel gate, that is if she wasn't wearing the amulet by accident, Lauren also knew that she would travel herself. She simply had to learn what had transpired back then and if she had been pining for a man all these years who actually loved someone else. The thought pained her, but she knew she had to find out, even if it was only to get peace of mind.

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